Toradora! Volume2

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These are color illustrations that were included in volume 2

竹宮ゆゆこ
イラスト◎ヤス

とらドラ2!

た-20-4

とらドラ2!

竹宮ゆゆこ

電撃文庫
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とらドラ2!

竜虎並び立つ！　と思いきや馴れ合い関係に逆戻りしてしまった竜児と大河。そんな二人に活を入れるかのように一人の転校生がやってくる。

その名は川嶋亜美。北村の幼なじみにしてファッションモデル。顔よしスタイルよし外面（そとづら）、よし。でもその本性は――？

北村に片思い中の大河は心中穏やかでなく、そんな大河に翻弄される竜児になぜか亜美が接近してきて――？

新たな女の子を加え、波乱含みの超弩級ラブコメ第2弾！

巻末には不幸体質の一年生、富家幸太と“手乗りタイガー”との接近遭遇を描く番外編「幸福の手乗りタイガー伝説」も収録です。

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とらドラ2！

竹宮ゆゆこ

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たけみや
竹宮ゆゆこ

2月24日生まれ、東京在住。低炭水化物ダイエットにわずか1日で挫折して、地道にウォーキング（散歩？）をしています。これがかなりいい調子で、桜など眺めつつ昼下がりの町を歩きまくり、やがて吸い込まれるようにケーキ屋へ……気がつけば3つ食べてました。ショック。

【電撃文庫作品】

わたしたちの田村くん
わたしたちの田村くん2
とらドラ！
とらドラ2！

イラスト：ヤス

1984年8月3日生。O型。徳島県生まれで千葉県在住。今年中に引っ越しを計画中。まずは部屋の片付けをせねばと思い立つも、部屋の惨状を見る限り前途は多難……。

カバー／暁印刷

とらドラ2!

竹宮ゆゆこ
イラスト◎ヤス

The palmtop Tiger

逢坂大河

千乗りタイガーこと逢坂大河。
身長公称145センチ（実測143.6センチ）。
十六歳、高校二年生――モスキート級。
「は？　……なに、あんた」第一印象は睨んで威嚇、
「邪魔よ。とっととあっち行け」次は低く唸って警告、
「ああもう鬱陶しい！　どけってば！」
……鉄拳制裁発動まで、所要時間は約十秒。
乳製品を与えれば一時的に沈静化するとの噂あり。
ただしチーズ系では効果は薄く、
あくまでデザート系に弱い……とか。

とらドラの女たち

とらドラの女たち

天才的猛獣使い・櫛枝実乃梨。四月生まれの十七歳、同じく高校二年生。
女子ソフトボール部を束ねるキャプテンで、
どんな苦境にもめげないマイペースさは敵チームにも
恐れられている、らしい。
大好物は「揚げ物！」、中好物は「煮物！」、小好物は「炒め物！」
——とはいえ蒸し物、焼き物、冷やし固め物など、多方面に対応できる。
唯一の苦手が「腐り物！」、最近の悩みは「吹き出物ー！」
今のところ、浮いた噂は一切なし。

The Super Strange

櫛枝実乃梨

The Third Girl Strikes!

川嶋亜美

165センチ45キロ、職業、モデル。
所属不明、詳細不明、敵味方不明、正体不明——
「え？　あれ？　もしかして、あたしになにか用事ですか？
あーん、やだもうあたしったら、ぼけっとしちゃって恥ずかしい～！
こんなんじゃ、またみんなに天然って言われちゃうよ～！
やだなあ、あたしってぜーんぜん天然なんかじゃないのに、
みんななにか勘違いしてるんだよね」
——繰り返す、正体不明。要注意。

「……まったく、変な奴らばっかりだ。
てめえら、心してページを開けよ。
ちなみに私は……まあ、追々な」

「……会長だって十分変でしょ」

デザイン◎荻窪裕司

巻末には番外編「とらドラ・スピンオフ！幸福の手乗りタイガー伝説」も収録です。

P257

とらドラ・スピンオフ！
幸福の手乗りタイガー伝説

Chapter 1

It was the last day of the nearly week-long string of holidays known as Golden Week,

"You're free, aren't you?"

The time was 1pm.

"Right? You've got some free time, don't you?"

As if the nice weather outside was a lie, the Takasu residence was faintly gloomy. Seemingly within arm's reach beyond the open south-facing window was the edge of the nearby apartment that towered above, so the brilliant sunshine of early summer didn't make it inside.

Nevertheless, the interior was methodically organized, every corner was cleaned perfectly, and despite being narrow, the miraculously trim habitat was enduring thanks to intelligent planning. That wonderfully comfortable and easy-to-live-in space existed thanks to the abilities of an only son named Ryūji, who was now finishing lunch in the kitchen with his back to the living room,

"Are you listening?"

No one took the time to even reply to his questioning voice, let alone with words of gratitude for his work. Taking a momentary break from washing, Ryūji turned around and stared pointedly at the white lump that was sprawled on the floor. That lump was lying in a messy heap next to the dining table, head-down with chin upon a folded cushion and a blankly befuddled face while poking a finger into the birdcage sitting nearby.

Nipping hungrily at the protruding finger as though he tasted something delicious was a yellow parrot, Inko-chan. His ugliness was his charm point; the beak that he loved to keep open was the color of concrete and the small tongue that licked and jut out was tan like the color of rotting beef. Also, the eyes with discolored whites even now seemed like they're on the verge of death. And as a bird incomprehensible to humans, his eyelids twitched as he convulsed in response to seemingly dangerous agitations. According to the owner, the hard to view situation had been getting worse.

"...Taiga. Stop that. Inko-chan is going crazy."

"...Hm? No way, you're right."

Finally turning around, the white lump--that is, Aisaka Taiga turned around and pulled her finger from the birdcage. Or at least, so it seemed.

"Eh? I can't take it out."

...So clumsy. Watching her tilt her head, Ryūji could only sigh.

"What's with that, you? This isn't the time to be sighing . I think I'm really stuck."

Pulling her small body up to sit on the tatami mat, Taiga held the birdcage in one hand as she tried to remove her finger while growling sullenly. Inko-chan simply wouldn't let go, instead valiantly clinging to Taiga's fingertip all the more intensely.

"Uwa...he's using his tongue..."

Even in the subdued lighting, the shuddering girl's waist-length hair, the color of smoked chestnuts, contrasted with the surrounding gray. Lightly draped over her delicate figure was a one-piece dress covered in lace. With an appearance complete with a white overskirt , the elegant volume was charming--

"Hey, wait. Why are you just staring? It's your bird that's acting up, so hurry up and do something, you GIY. "

"G, I, Y?"

"Dumb dog. I said it a little more gently, so why don't you show some gratitude?"

This sudden surge of verbal abuse took away his ability to even speak. And yet, if not for the harsh language, Taiga would have been just like a moving French doll.

In any case, her eyes were like glittering gems, her pale lips were like wild rose buds, and her well-ordered looks were as temptingly hazardous as a snare dipped in condensed milk. Unfortunately, she was hopeless,

"Agh, so irritating, gah!"

With a creak, the shape of the birdcage began to bend in her hand--She had inevitably been born beneath the starsign of the brutally violent tiger. Her given nickname

was 'The Palmtop Tiger'...Because although her size was small, her ferociousness was comparable to that of a tiger .

With that said, it wasn't like Ryūji would lose in terms of ferocious appearances. He peered out sharply from the gaps of his bangs that were still in the process of growing . He had an almost excessively dangerous look, a stare that belied his personality. Even though there wasn't anything special about his physical abilities, his aura came off as being incredibly terrible, like that of a young man who would snap when overcome by negativity.

However,

"D,d,d, don't break it! Don't! Carefully!"

In Ryūji's case, he only looked dangerous. Wiping his wet hands as he went over to protect his pet's habitat from the tiger, he knelt down beside Taiga. He tried to pull on the birdcage, but,

"Oh-ow-ouch!"

"Ah, sorry."

Ryūji leapt back as Taiga shouted with her finger still ensnared. Probably surprised by that yell, together with the already present stimulation, Inko suddenly bit down hard on Taiga's fingertip.

"Eeeeeee~!"

Perhaps as a result of the immense pain, while letting out even more shrieks, she managed to pull out her finger.

Just like that, they freed her finger and then lay passed out upon the tatami mats without saying anything for several seconds.

"...That hurt...Enough already~...!"

Raising her head, Taiga looked in Inko-chan's direction with eyes that, although slightly moist with tears, gleamed like a honed assassin's blade. Perhaps he understood the severity of the situation.

"...Awawawa."

Inko-chan looked up at Taiga and slightly quivered with a clatter. With the stress pent up throughout his

body, he began to shed feathers in large clumps. In his confusion, Ryūji embraced the birdcage against his chest,

"Uwawa, Inko-chan is going bald, pull yourself together, stay calm! If you get any uglier, I don't know if we'll be able to live together anymore, you know! I don't know what Taiga will do next, so let's get out of here."

At the same time, Taiga also stood up,

"Wait, what's up with that? It's not like I'd get serious against something like that Inko thing."

"Well then, why are you making a fist?"

"It's so I can give you your punishment."

While forcing him back towards the wall, she clenched her small fist tightly.

"What did I do?!"

"My finger! It hurts, you know!"

"How should I know?!"

Chasing Ryūji, who was running away while clutching the birdcage, Taiga circled the room when,

"Fugya~!"

She fell flat on her face onto the tatami mat. Through the partially open sliding door, he could make out a white something protruding from the floor, which was what Taiga had tripped upon.

Incidentally, the white thing's true nature was,

"...Why is this sticking out here?"

While his eyes looked as though he had snapped and might brandish a blade, Ryūji put down the birdcage, and looked at what was actually his mother's bare leg. By the way, Ryūji hadn't snapped, he was just bewildered.

With just one leg protruding from her room that was separated by a sliding screen, the head of the family, Yasuko had fallen into a deep sleep. After getting drunk while serving at Bishamonten Kuni, the city's only hostess bar where she was employed, she had returned home at 6 am.

"Ah, did we end up waking her?"

Taiga, despite being thrice afflicted by selfishness, a twisted nature, and vanity, still showed her manners by politely asking in a hushed voice from her position on the ground.

"Nah, still sleeping."

Of course, Ryūji also lowered his voice and, taking a hold of the protruding bare leg, began pushing her back into her bedroom.

As a result,

"Mm…Hm, hua~…"

A coquettish and nasally voice. Then,

"…Waaah!"

"Ah, what's wrong, what's wrong?"

The owner of the leg suddenly burst into tears. In her son's middle school gym shorts and a t-shirt thin enough that her black lace bra showed through, she struggled, flailing her limbs and rubbing the white surface of the futon with the back of her hand.

Despite her pathetic behavior, she was already 33 years old, a woman whose boasted bust size was an F cup.

"I, I smell fried rice omelettes~! Ryū-chan and Taiga-chan ate it all by themselves while Ya-chan was sleeping! Waah~!"

"Don't be ridiculous; I made sure to save some for you. It's wrapped up for you in the kitchen. I'll put it in the refrigerator for now so you can microwave and eat it when you wake up."

"…Will you write 'YASUCO' on it with ketchup?"

"I'm not writing anything. It'll just get messed up once I wrap it. Anyway, it's 'YASUKO'."

"…Ooh…Ya-chan, is still sleepy, so please don't say any hard things…"

Falling onto her pillow with a plop, the by-circumstance single mother Yasuko soon began breathing the light sighs of sleep. She earned a respectable sum despite being hopeless at housework, but although she had a kind and gentle personality, the screws in her head were becoming hopelessly loose… Every day her son Ryūji spent some time trying to help his mother keep her wits about her. Not to mention, when Yasuko was in her third year of middle school,

"My standard math score was 17~. My homeroom teacher was speechless, and we ended up just staring at each other until the day ended~."

…Or so he heard.

Regardless of all that, for the time being the Takasu household lifestyle, rather than falling into bankruptcy,

had been continuing to prosper. With Yasuko as the pillar of support, Ryūji in charge of the chores, the pet Inko-chan, and,

"Ouch…I scraped my chin. Seriously, this house is too cramped to begin with. Hey, Ryūji, will you make sashimi for dinner? It's totally unrelated, but that collision just now made me think of it."

"…It really is completely unrelated…"

"What? Are you saying I can't have any sashimi?"

Glaring at Ryūji with her eyes wide open while rubbing her jaw was one tiger with a wild temperament. Even though they weren't really living together,

"…There's a sale on tuna going on in front of the station at five. If I remember correctly."

"Well, I want to go shopping too, so come pick me up at 4:45. I'm going home."

"Eh? You're leaving?"

"You got a complaint?"

During the break, they had been together throughout the day. They had gone shopping together. Although it was natural that she didn't stay over, they still took a nap side by side from after dinner till late at night nearly everyday. As for living together almost constantly, it was more a matter of convenience. Nevertheless, Ryūji continued to spout aimless words at the back of Taiga who was standing in front of him.

"What are you going back for? Do you have something to do? In any case, we're still on vacation, right? Isn't it still ok?"

He rambled on trying to stall for even just a bit more time. Brushing aside her hair as though it annoyed her, Taiga cast him a cold look.

"Aren't you the only one who's free? I need to do the laundry soon. The weather's good after all."

"Laundry? It's just pressing a button, isn't it? Your house's washing machine doubles as a dryer and the drying is automatic, so why are you saying you need to go home?"

"Che," Taiga clicked her tongue in irritation, glaring as though she wanted to seriously kill the annoyance that wouldn’t get out of her way.

"Agh, how depressing! What in the world are you saying?! If there's something you want to say then spit it out already!"

Almost painfully, Ryūji mumbled,

"...W, will you go to the family restaurant with me...?"

"That again?!"

In an instant, Taiga’s irritation flared even stronger. Still, Ryūji didn’t flinch from just that,

"It's fine if you're only doing this much, isn't it?! I can't go by myself! Just today, you said my fried rice omelette was good so I made you some, isn't that right? And moreover, just how long do you think I'm going to keep helping you in your constant troubles with Kitamura? Why not help me out a little?! Just that would be fine, wouldn't it?!"

"Ah, geez, shut up already! Just shut up! Lay off!"

"Off what?!"

In the midst of their pointless arguing, from behind the sliding screen came a “Oo, ooh” --Suffering from a hangover, Yasuko had let out a moan. The two of them instantly got quiet,

"…I guess it can’t be helped; I’ve seriously had enough ."

The one who finally gave in was Taiga.

"You’re treating, understand? And buy me a magazine later. I’m sick of talking to you already."

Pretending to spit bad-manneredly with a ‘pe’ sound, or at least it seemed that way…Taiga spoke her mind. Still, Ryūji nodded like a man, without a single complaint . If she was going to accompany him to the restaurant, that kind of reimbursement was a small price to pay. Because that family restaurant was--

* * *

"Ah, there you go! One order!"

The yogurt parfait appeared before Taiga's eyes with a bang as it was placed in front of her.

"It's a secret, but this one's a Taiga Special, with extra vanilla ice cream. Don't tell the other customers and enjoy~"

"Is this okay, Minorin? Won't you be scolded for this?"

"I'm telling you it's fine, it's fine, so relax! I mean, you've been coming almost every day this holiday season. This is the least I could do! And what about Takasu-kun, can I get you anything? I recommend the green tea parfait, or if you don't want anything sweet, then perhaps something like potato fries. I'll serve you with super-service."

"Ah, no, I..."

When faced with that wonderful smile, Ryūji could only wave his arms, unable to even bring himself to look up from his coffee. That said, his eyes weren't even open in the first place.

It was just too dazzling.

Dressed as a waitress stood Kushieda Minori.

Wearing her silky hair in a ponytail, her slender and dazzling nape was exposed. A pale orange one-piece draped with a pure white apron, the uniform was simply too cute. Even her ordinarily inconspicuous bust swelled against the thin fabric, and her shining smile had the allure of an unripened peach.

Facing downwards in order to try and hide his blushing face, he desperately avoided eye contact with his one-year-long unrequited love. He wanted to look, but wasn't able to, or rather, he couldn't bring himself to look. It was the contradiction of a man in love.

"Maybe you don't want to hear it, but are you going to keep insisting that you're not going out even though you two have been coming in here for tea almost every day during vacation? You guys are a couple, aren't you?"

There was only one response to that sort of question,

""No, absolutely not.""

They spoke in unison while shaking their heads.

"Really?"

"Really."

Scrutinizingly, as though she was shocked, Taiga looked up at her best friend's face, which was full of kindness and was without a trace of malice.

"Minorin, you've been here working almost every day during this time off, but it doesn't mean you're going out with the shop manager or some old guy in the cooking galley or anything like that, you know. For us it's the same. Even though you say we're here together, it doesn' t mean we're going out or anything."

"…There was a jump in that logic, wasn't there?"

"What Minorin is saying is just as faulty then."

It had become pretty much official that 'Takasu and Aisaka are not dating', yet even now, Minori would take every chance she could get to pose her suspicions in a joking manner. But to Ryūji who bore a secret unrequited love for Minori, it was too cruel to be a joke.

"Yeah, yeah, I understand about the old guys."

"Just what old men are you talking about?"

"Because it wouldn't work out with any of the shop managers; it wouldn't work with the one from the shabu-shabu shop where I work part-time every other night, or the one from the karaoke shop, or the one from the convenience store that I work at in the morning. So I guess kind of like that, it wouldn't work with Taiga and Takasu. That's what you mean, isn't it? Well then, I have to get back to work."

"…Just how is that part-time?"

Without thinking, the words just slipped out of his mouth by accident. As spontaneous as it might have been , Ryūji still congratulated himself for doing so.

"You might be right, but it's probably because I've been saving up. And besides, even though we're in the middle of vacation, we still have club activities. According to the captain, we can't just play around."

Ryūji couldn't come up with a reply to that. Instead, the one who kept the conversation going was Taiga.

"You've been overworking yourself a lot. With all the money you've earned, is there even anything you actually want?"

"Because I've got the time, I need to keep working. It's a service fetish."

"…W, what is that?"

"It's being refreshed by working. Well, see you again later!"

Leaving them with that mysterious phrase, the frankly hyper serving girl Minori headed towards the kitchen. After the two of them watched her go,

"How admirable…It's not just that she's cute, but she's also diligent. Totally different from you."

"…What?"

"Well, you wake up in the afternoon, come to my house with both your head and your clothes in a mess, bum a lunch, then continue to laze around watching television, bum a dinner, hang around acting exhausted

late into the night, and then just go home, don't you? How unproductive."

Taiga lifted her head suddenly.

"It's the holidays, so it's fine, right? And it's not like you're any different. Besides, aren't you forgetting something important? I've been making the effort to come here for your sake, haven't I? Actually, that should be the most important thing to you."

She attacked him with her parfait spoon.

"Ugh…You splashed some in my eye!"

"Even though I'm on vacation, isn't it more like I've been wasting my time for you? Don't you get it? Hm?"

Showing more scorn than anger in her eyes, Taiga spoke arrogantly.

"You should be satisfied with this much. Since I'm here just to let you see the one you like. But you know, it's not the same for me. There isn't anyone who's kindly supporting my love like that."

"…Why the heck are you talking so cryptically. It's not like it's my fault that you haven't been able to see Kitamura. I really did try to help, you know?"

"…"

"Don't just start ignoring me in the middle of the conversation!"

"Shut up!"

Saying whatever she pleased and then immediately falling silent, Taiga's eyes were now glued to the girl's magazine that she bought from a bookstore on their way over. Though he didn't really agree with what she said, he could only swallow her inevitable criticism together with his straight black coffee.

Speaking of which, it absolutely wasn't his fault. He recalled the early afternoon of the first day of vacation.

While being pestered by Taiga, he had phoned Kitamura, his close friend and also the object of Taiga's unrequited love. Knowing that Kitamura would have at least three days without softball club activities that both he and Minori were a part of, Taiga made Ryūji ask

about his plans on those days. With that said, Taiga completely lacked the courage to ask Kitamura out on her own, so she had devised a heartfelt scheme where Ryūji would promise to meet up with Kitamura and she could pretend to join them along the way.

However, there was only a blunt reply to the phone call being made next to the nervous Taiga, "Man, it's so horrible! I wanted at least one day to go out and play, but with everything at home and with student council, I'm completely swamped!"---No matter how you looked at it, the timing was terrible. There was just no way he could have done anything in that situation.

"…You couldn't even speak with him at all if you saw him anyway."

"…"

Looking up without really speaking or even altering her expression, only her lips moved as Taiga barely whispered to herself— Go. To. Hell.

"…No way…Are you going to send me?..."

"Did you hear that? Well aren't your ears good."

With a smirking sneer, she gave Ryūji a look more befitting of a devil than a tiger.

In that situation, Ryūji couldn't help but think:

Just why was he spending all his time conspiring with this fellow when he was only being ridiculed and scorned?

"Ah~!"

--Taiga's short yell interrupted his thoughts.

"Aaah! What the heck are you doing, you klutz?!"

Despite panicking a bit, Ryūji stood up with a tissue in his hand before kneeling like a servant next to where Taiga was sitting.

Some of the blueberry sauce had missed Taiga's mouth and spilt onto her one-piece dress near the knees. He had to finish wiping it before it completely soaked into the white lace.

"Aww, my bad…Did it stain?"

"Nah, it's okay. If we take care of it properly when we get back, it should be all right."

Dabbing the tissue in a cup of water, he quickly yet nervously swabbed at Taiga's dress while she moaned pitifully. After all, he estimated that it was likely more than twenty times as expensive as his street clothes. Even if it wasn't his, he could never bring himself to handle valuable things with anything but the utmost care. Even if they had been arguing up until just now, that wasn't really an issue. Because when he noticed something wrong, he always got caught up with it---Yeah, that's right. Just like in this situation.

It seemed as though he and Taiga were always like this . While he continued with the emergency cleaning, Ryūji unconsciously avoided eye contact.

The only reason that the two of them were even together was because they were each in love with the other's close friend. That fact became known to both of them after a coincidental event, and it wasn't before long this strange alliance was born.

Taiga, who had been living alone, suddenly started relying on Ryūji for her everyday necessities and Ryūji,

who naturally loved chores and cleanliness, didn't refuse her demands. Consequently, things kept progressing bit by bit until eventually, they had fallen into the subtly complicated lifestyle that was exemplified by their current situation.

She's such a klutz.

The fearsome girl known as the Palmtop Tiger had a surprising other side; in other words, she was simply more hopelessly danger-prone than anyone else he had ever met, so he ended up being unable to keep his eyes off of her for even a moment. When he let her go by herself, she would inevitably fall several times a day. If she was behind him, he would end up looking over his shoulder, or if she was using a flame, he would want to call out to her. If he didn't prepare them for her, she would even skip meals. Her physical condition would deteriorate. She was so hopeless that he felt like escorting her just about every day so she wouldn't do anything absurd.

Beyond that, what else could he say?—He had ended up witnessing her once-in-a-lifetime near miss of a confession. Surprisingly, he also found out that she was a crybaby.

Things went pretty smoothly for the most part, but even though Ryūji and Taiga ate together, went to school and even shopped together, there wasn't any mutual fondness in the odd relationship they had developed.

If asked on the spot, Ryūji could only come up with one other reason for them being together. That would be that he was a dragon and Taiga was a tiger---Together they composed a complete set, or something like that.

"Ah!"

Once again, a spilled blueberry-colored drop cut Ryūji's contemplations short.

"...Be a bit more careful. And of all places, why did the second drop follow the first? It's a good thing that it fell on your finger."

"Geez, shut up already, it wasn't like it was on purpose. In the first place, I didn't ask you to clean it up for me or anything."

"Just what nonsense are you talking about now? If I left it alone, would you be able to remove the stain

yourself? You wouldn't, right? I'll have you know, I'm not doing this for your sake, I'm doing it for the dress's sake."

"Wha? Oh, I see. If you like it so much, how about I give it to you? Then you could wear it, this dress."

Anyhow…now, she was gradually becoming more vicious.

Even so, he couldn't stand watching such expensive clothing be stained, so while making an expression like that of a three-time repeat offender being sentenced to ten years (perhaps with some amount of displeasure), he ignored her and immersed himself in his efforts without hesitation. Then,

"Ah."

"Did you do something else now?!"

Though Ryūji looked up instinctively at the defenseless sound that Taiga let slip,

"That's not it…This cute thing, I'm going to buy it. I'm definitely going to buy it."

Taiga was muttering while holding up a page in her magazine by its edge.

"Are you wasting your money again? Just how much longer will you keep buying these fluttery and fluffy things that are all so similar? Well, which one is it? How much is it?"

"I've had enough, you're so noisy! Do you think you're my mother or something?!"

"I'll end up being the one who has to organize them, so I should have the right to check first."

Ryūji got up and sat down next to the tempestuous Taiga, taking a glance at the page she was looking at while in close proximity. He spent the other day frantically arranging the expensive clothes that were flooding out from Taiga's bedroom closet, fortunately things were still put away sensibly. He should have the right to restrict her frivolous spending. And so,

"…T, this one? This one is…I wonder just how…?"

He cocked his head without thinking. On the page with what Taiga said she'd definitely buy, the model wore a slender pair of denim jeans that showed off her

long legs while striking a beautiful pose. It wasn't fluttery or fluffy at all, but--

"…Even though I'm telling you this for your own sake …if you were to wear this, it would be a tragedy."

In any case, Taiga was just a bit taller than 140 cm. It should have been easy to see that she didn't have those sort of long legs, however,

"…What I want is this bag!"

"O, oh…Is that what you meant?"

"Well geez, I'm sorry my legs are so short."

As her voice resounded with an unsettling eeriness that completely belied her calm tone, Ryūji unthinkingly pulled back, preparing to escape. Taiga's eyes narrowed in anger while the edges of her mouth turned upwards as though she were smiling.

"Wait now, come on, stay calm…We're at Kushieda's workplace…Um, we're at the palace."

"What's that?! Are you kidding me?! I'm not just going to take that sort of attitude from you! If you understand that you misspoke then how about apologizing first?!"

Taiga wrinkled her nose ferociously—-It seemed as though his strange joke had completely flopped. This was bad. She was seriously mad now. Of course, he truly wanted to apologize quickly, but,

"Guh.."

"At any rate, I've got short legs! But it's never bothered anyone else before!"

Grasping him by the nape of the neck, she started shaking him about violently. He couldn't speak; in fact, he couldn't even breathe. Desperately struggling and kicking the table shamelessly, he desperately tried to tell her "I surrender!", nothing more.

Then, he was suddenly released from Taiga's grasp. Having been set free, Ryūji collapsed onto the seat coughing while trying to recover.

"H, hey now…Were you trying to kill me?! Seriously!"

"…Wa, wa, wa…"

Absentmindedly, with her mouth partly open, Taiga blinked in surprise. It looked like she had finally realized that she was being overly violent, he nodded sincerely,

"That's right, I was shocked you know. Hopefully now that you understand, this experience will keep you from strangling anybody a second time..."

Glaring intently at Ryūji, Taiga pointed at the page in the magazine they were just looking at, going "Look, look !"

"…I already heard you say you wanted that bag."

"Not that! This! This person!"

At the end of her cherry blossom-colored fingernail was a beautiful woman with her legs deftly crossed—-no, a beautiful girl's smiling face. In the middle of a trendy black setting, she was stylishly wearing a camisole that must have cost several hundred dollars and even more expensive denim jeans while her lightly coiled hair trailed in the wind. She was certainly a very pretty model

, but since she was a model, it was only to be expected that she would be pretty. There didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary about the page.

The moment he tried to ask what she meant by it, she grabbed his head.

"Owowow!"

Just like that, his head was spun around almost 180 degrees to face behind him.

"…Oh."

Without thinking, he let out a similar exclamation of surprise.

A newly arrived customer was being seated by a waitress not too far from where Ryūji and Taiga were sitting.

It wasn't just Taiga and Ryūji who were looking at her either. Turning around to look and whispering quietly, nearly all the customers inside the relatively crowded shop were glancing towards her.

The first thing that stood out was how her slender body gave off the impression of a fawn. She didn't appear to be exceptionally tall, but because of her relatively petite head, it balanced out just right.

Her hair had been carefully groomed to an utterly glossy silkiness. But instead of being overdone, it rested lightly on her shoulders with a kind of carefree air.

Wearing large Hollywood-style sunglasses on her small childlike face, she walked with flawless elegance. Her thin ankles that were clad in heeled sandals looked just like a finished sculpture.

Even though she was just wearing simply knit denim, her un-Japanese-like lengthy limbs accentuated her girlish style more than any dress could. With a brand name bag hanging from her shoulder and a polished white complexion, it was easy to see she wasn't just some amateur.

In short, a true beauty. There was an overwhelming attractiveness that one couldn't help but notice. When she casually removed her sunglasses, the shop was engulfed by a range of reactions.

"Oooh…"

Even Ryūji sighed and fervently stared without thinking. As though a haze had been lifted from their eyes, her sparkling good looks were revealed.

It was a wonder that a pair of such large eyes could fit on her petite face. Her smooth face was tinged elegantly pink. The disparity between her carefree expression and her carefully refined style was even more eye-catching.

She seemed charmingly pure through and through. She was gentle, calm, and graceful. Definitely like an angel, benevolently descending upon this family restaurant to share her brilliant aura with the gathered masses. He almost expected there to be a halo over her head.

And no matter how you looked at that beautiful face,

"...This person, she's…"

"...Yeah..."

The exact same person, the beauty from the page that Taiga was pointing at earlier.

"…She's a model…"

Ryūji sighed deeply; it was the first time he'd ever seen someone and instinctively thought 'Model'.

Although in a magazine she might have seemed simply commonplace, she was really cute in person.

"That girl, her name is 'Kawashima Ami'. She was even on the front cover a couple months ago."

Unusually excited, Taiga told him almost pridefully.

"Is that right?...Haa…I, I think I might have just become a fan…Kawashima Ami-san…I wonder what she's doing in a boring place like this…"

"Her mother, she's Kawashima Anna, the actress."

"Ooh~…Didn't we see her just last night?...[Izu's a Good Place for Murder・ Temptation of Capybara Hot Springs・ The Great Homicide Investigator, Reiko Yūzuki- Volume 4]…So she's the daughter of that Reiko Yūzuki…Now that you mention it, I can see the resemblance. Alright, I'm going to take a picture with my cell phone."

"Knock it off, or I'll get mad."

"I, is that so?...Anyway, let's calm down for now. I got a little too excited."

"How undignified."

"Hey, you were getting excited too."

Sitting side by side on the same seat, the two of them took a few deep breaths.

"Well, anyway…we saw something good, didn't we?"

"It's the only thing I'll remember about this vacation."

While nodding in agreement, they each grabbed their respective cups at the same time, Ryūji's filled with coffee and Taiga's with milk tea, and simultaneously brought them to their mouths to drink.

"Yūsaku~! Uncle, Auntie, there's a seat over here~!"

"Oh!"

""Guah!""

At the same time, they had spewed their drinks violently. Choking and coughing in unison, the two of them almost passed out…That was because the beautiful model that appeared suddenly in front of them was calling out to someone they were both quite familiar with .

"W, w, wha…Why?!"

"Ki~, Kita~, Kitamu~, Kitamura-kun?! No way, why?! What's going on?!"

With Ryūji against the table like a piece of trembling paper and Taiga flailing like a dancing octopus, their arms had at some point become entwined.

The two of them were then spotted,

"Hmm? If it isn't Takasu and Aisaka, how unexpected! What sort of mess have you gotten into? Never mind that , you two get along pretty well, don't you guys?"

Kitamura Yūsaku, who had just entered the shop, waved to them looking like always while heading their way. Badly shaken, Ryūji's knife-like stare became even

sharper; and Taiga, who had been overwhelmed by a flood of emotion, was dumbfounded. Meanwhile, oblivious to their situation,

"It seems that Kushieda works here part-time. Did you happen to see her?"

Kitamura just continued cheerfully.

"Well, we saw her, but…this isn't what it looks like!"

Looking like a stalwart monk defending Mt. Hiei, Ryūji moved a bit closer to his upbeat friend.

"You, just what's going on here?! What's with this…?"

"Eh? Ah, that's right. This is a good chance for me to introduce you. These are my parents. Takasu, you've probably already met my mother from when we were having the parent-teacher-student conferences."

Even though it was rude while Kitamura's parents were politely bowing and going through the formal pleasantries,

"You're mistaken! That's not what I meant!"

He couldn't keep from violently shaking his head.

"Not about them, but um, uh, well look, that!"

Having a limited repertoire of facial expressions, Ryūji tried to express his predicament to his best friend through full-body pantomime. However,

"What's wrong? Yūsaku?"

"Oh, we were just exchanging introductions."

---Things just got worse.

The cause of Ryūji and Taiga's agitation was walking over on her own. It almost seemed like she was surrounded by glittering sparkles as she gave off an alluring fragrance,

"She, this is Kawashima Ami. Even though it might not look like it, she used to live around here. Before she moved, she used to be my neighbor. I guess you could call her a childhood friend."

"What do you mean by ‘though it might not look like it ’?"

Even while smiling, she made a puffy face and playfully scowled at Kitamura like an ordinary girl. It all really happened right in front of Ryūji. In reality. In three-dimensional space.

It was such an extraordinary situation...yet Kitamura looked completely calm,

"It’s a figure of speech. Anyway, these are my good friends Takasu Ryūji, and Aisaka Taiga."

Sitting right next to each other on the same seat and looking like some sort of weird boy/girl combination, they were introduced to the angel. The angel that was Kawashima Ami greeted them while smiling and laughing cutely,

"How do you do? I'm Ami, it's a pleasure to meet you! "

She nimbly and openly offered both her hands.

Ryūji stared at her beautiful hands...More like mesmerized, he couldn't even understand what her action meant and had become stiff like a robot. Then,

"Hey, let's shake on it. Any friend of Yūsaku's is a friend of mine you know."

---His hand melted. The palms of his hands started sweating,

"…A, ah, a."

Because Kawashima Ami had gently lifted Ryūji's hand that had been laying on the table and was grasping it in her own two hands. They were pleasantly cool, and where her ring was gently touching, it was even colder…

"Eh, hm, this wouldn't happen to be…?"

Quickly letting go of the stupefied Ryūji's hand, her slim fingers were now pointing at Taiga's magazine that was still laid out on the table. Then,

"Kyaa!"

An exquisite scream. Flustered, Ami took the magazine and held it against her chest, then shrugged as though she were embarrassed. Even while she tightly embraced the magazine to hide it and kept her small face tilted downwards, her eyes glanced upwards with a sparkling gleam and she started mumbling.

"No way…! Such a coincidence…Why?! Could it be,… ah, no way, you already found out? That I'm…this…I mean, that I appear in this…that I have that kind of job… "

She seemed to be trembling with sincere bewilderment ---she kept on going for a few seconds. 'What is she saying?', Ryūji thought, a little surprised.

It was pretty obvious that even without seeing some magazine, anyone would immediately think 'model' or ' celebrity' just by looking at her. He didn't understand why she acted like she needed to keep it a secret. Was it

really possible that Ami wasn't aware of how exceptionally cute she was?

He managed to squeeze out a reply that expressed what he was thinking.

"Well…If I look at you, the impression I get…is that of a model, so…"

He said it pretty bluntly, but that was the best Ryūji could do. Still,

"Eh? That's gotta be a lie!"

Totally incredulous, Ami's voice rose, her eyes widened, and she cocked her head.

"I'm just not like that at all! I don't even have any makeup on and these clothes were just thrown on…Just what part of my humble appearance is anything like a model?"

In other words, she really didn't realize at all, this angel. So innocent, or maybe pure would be a better word.

"Just look, my hair's such a mess because I didn't brush it when I woke up, and I just left it like that and came anyway, didn't I? I wonder why…Isn't it strange… I just don't get it…"

While looking at her worried face, Ryūji started to kind of understand. For a person who had been born naturally beautiful, she must not have understood how unusually pretty she was, definitely. However, that might be the reason she was so pure. Also, that purity just made her even prettier---While he was absent-mindedly thinking that,

"Ah!"

Ami suddenly pointed her finger at Ryūji's nose.

"Just now, you thought 'She's a natural airhead', didn't you?"

"Eh…?"

In front of Ryūji's agitated and rigid eyes, Ami puffed her face and stared at him with teasing eyes. He had

definitely been thinking the word ‘natural’, but the implied meaning was different…Well actually, it might apply, at least in this case.

"You know what I mean, don’t you? You thought that, didn’t you"

Of course, Ami’s pupils were trembling with a hint of a smile, and being guided by that motion, he unwittingly ended up nodding.

"I knew it!"

Sweetly crying with an ‘Aah’, Ami twisted her lips into a sort of pout.

"Geez, I’m always being called that. Like, ‘Ami is a real airhead, isn’t she?’, they say. I wonder why that is, because even though I’m not like that at all, everyone keeps saying it…After all, I bet even Yūsaku thinks of me like that. With a disgusted look I bet."

"That just isn’t true."

Barely touching the subject, Kitamura smiled somewhat bitterly and shrugged his shoulders. Then, having decided he had waited long enough, he gently pressed Ami's back,

"Well, let's go back to our seat. We're keeping Dad and the others from ordering."

"Ah, that's right! That's no good, we've been keeping Uncle and the others waiting, haven't we?"

He held up a hand apologetically towards Ryūji and Taiga.

"Takasu and Aisaka will still be here for a while, right? We're just eating dinner with Dad and the others before going home, so let's talk some more afterwards."

"Ah, sure."

"See you later, then!"

Waving her hand before turning around, Ami's figure was extremely pretty---Like a powerful surging wave. And yet, like a wave, it seemed like she would keep on going as she was.

While watching his best friend and Ami leave, Ryūji leaned his back against the seat as if exhausted. He kept an eye on them until the two made it to their seat,

"Ah…"

Still delirious, he sighed for perhaps the millionth time .

Although she's such a beautiful person and her mother's even an actress, she's still so pure and unpretentious. Immaculate to the core, so much so that she didn't even consider herself pretty at all. She might have been just a little air-headed, but even that was rather cute. For such a girl to exist in this world…she was simply perfect.

It was such a difference from the messed-up Taiga, who was certainly pretty enough but had an unusually nasty temper that was just depressing. It was a waste of time to even try and compare them.

"…Hey, about Kawashima Ami, although she's a celebrity, she seems like a really nice girl. Even though she has a pretty face, she still has an amiable personality

…You know, it wouldn't hurt to learn a thing or two from her. Since she and Kitamura were childhood friends …Don't you think, Ta…"

"…"

"…Tai, ga?"

With a gulp, Ryūji quickly scooted away from her. Just like that, he casually left his seat then moved over to the seat across the table.

He hadn't realized his carelessness, but right next to him, there had been a silently growling tiger. He mistakingly thought her presence had gotten unusually weak, but---rather than that, it was more like how a predator stalking its prey keeps its presence hidden.

Although she might have put on a weak appearance, it was as if right now a swirling mass of murderous intent was radiating from Taiga's body and surrounding her. With her small pretty face looking like a Noh mask, she started gnawing at her twisted lips like a wild animal tearing into meat. A piercing and ferocious light could be seen in her large eyes, partially covered by her thin

eyelids, as she stared at the departing Ami's back. Her small body remained in her seat but her chin was raised pridefully as Taiga sat looking extremely displeased.

He set aside the comparison, but in the end Ryūji couldn't keep himself from talking.

"…You…How should I put this, I wonder what that was all about. Though it's true that a pretty girl who gets along well with Kitamura has suddenly appeared, you shouldn't get so clearly irritated. Weren't you acting all happy just a little while ago?"

"…You're wrong."

Coupled with her lip-licking, her low whisper resounded in an ominous manner.

"It's not a simple thing like that. Rather it's…"

However, Taiga stopped midway and flipped her bangs upwards. "Fuu," with a small sigh, he could almost feel the tiger's tenseness wash away.

"…Ah well, whatever."

Her eyes that had been tensely shining shifted into a cruel smile as they were directed at Ryūji.

"You're not so low that you'd actually want to get close to her, are you? You get it, don't you? Not even you should be that dumb."

"…What are you talking about?"

"Well, maybe I just have a certain sense for this kind of thing. I'll give you only one hint for now---The kind of person who labels themselves as a 'natural airhead', there's no way they're really being honest."

"…Is that kind of thing really true?"

"Think whatever you want."

"Fu," while twisting her rosy lips viciously in triumph, Taiga stopped staring at Ami. Even though she had been pouting for awhile, Ryūji could understand that she wasn't demanding to go home because she was still hoping to talk with Kitamura, even if for only a little bit.

While Taiga continued looking through her magazine with an expression that he couldn't read, Ryūji continued unsteadily turning the pages of his complimentary booklet on bento side dishes---Nearly an hour had passed.

"Hey. My parents, they just went home."

Fashionably dressed in an almost glaringly obvious set of Uniqlo clothes, Kitamura was trailed by a radiantly beautiful young female model as they made their way over. As she moved inside the shop, the glances on Ami from all the other customers were full of admiration.

"Sorry for the wait!"

A step behind Kitamura, Ami expressed an angelic smile and gave Ryūji a wave. Ensnared, he ended up waving on instinct,

"…Well, aren't you in good mood…Just like a dog wagging its tail…"

Taiga's cold words made him feel oddly embarrassed about how he might look, and he lowered his hand.

Understandably, even without saying anything like ‘ Kawashima-san will sit here, and Kitamura will sit over there’ they very naturally ended up with the boys and girls sitting together separately.

Sitting next to Ryūji, Kitamura posed a question to Ami over his open menu.

"Ami, you’ve still got some time, right? Is there anything you’d like?"

"No thanks, I’m already stuffed from earlier, so I’m fine…How about you two?"

Suddenly being brought into the conversation, Ryūji’s shoulder leapt as if shocked with electricity. Taiga kept her head down as she just stared at her own knees, petrified and seemingly unable to look in the direction of the casually dressed Kitamura.

"Eh, well, we…What do you think? How about it, Taiga?"

Taiga shook her still hanging head back and forth--- The conversation died. *Hmm, what would be good next? What should we talk about?*

Ryūji waited with expectant eyes for Kitamura, the only one acquainted with everyone present, to start speaking and resume the dialogue. Realistically, this would probably be the one and only time he ever sat together with a model in his entire life. So that he could remember the moment fondly, he was sincerely hoping that Kitamura could steer things in a fun direction.

But then,

"Aah, I'm so worn out after dealing with my family. Sorry, but I'm going to the bathroom for a bit."

Completely oblivious to the situation, the ever-relaxed Kitamura ended up standing from his seat.

"Eh, wai…"

Ryūji hastily raised his hand, but he couldn't just say something like, 'Please don't leave us here'.

He looked at Taiga. She was still immobilized with her head hung low.

He looked at Ami. She wore a lightly questioning smile---She was tilting her head curiously while watching Ryūji, as though fascinated by his odd behavior .

It's impossible. No matter what he did, there was just no way he could reconcile this situation by himself. While acting nonchalant and scratching his head,

"Ah, you know, I kind of need to go too…Umm, which way is it…?"

Following a bit behind Kitamura, the 'getting up from their seats together' formation…or in short, the ' accompanying' formation was formed.

Of course, he naturally wondered if it was okay to leave the Palmtop Tiger and that girl behind in that kind of atmosphere, but…he succumbed cowardly to his nervousness. He was a poor speaker even under normal circumstances, but his companions were girls, including an incredibly beautiful model. Taiga just wasn't reliable in this kind of situation, so if Kitamura left him alone with them, Ryūji wouldn't have even a scrap of self-confidence left.

Simply unable to look back at the seat he left behind, Ryūji followed after Kitamura who was heading in the direction of the men's bathroom. He couldn't be any more ashamed, but it couldn't be helped. At the very least, it would allow him to relieve himself.

However, Kitamura suddenly turned around before the door,

"…Right. Here we are."

"W, what?"

"In this situation, I knew you'd definitely leave your seat with me."

Readjusting his silver-rimmed glasses, he whispered that. He discretely motioned Ryūji, whose eyes were glittering with bewilderment, over to hide behind the cover of a cigarette vending machine,

"I have something I want to ask. And I want you to answer me honestly."

His apricot-shaped eyes were pointed directly forward . Then a moment later, very clearly,

"What did you think about Ami?"

He asked.

"…you, what about the bathroom?"

"Don't need to go."

Making such a serious face, it seemed that Kitamura had seriously walked over here just to talk with Ryūji. Even though Ryūji didn't really understand why he was being asked, he felt like he had to answer. It wasn't like there was any reason he wouldn't want to answer anyway.

"…Well, I don't really…You, don't just show up all of a sudden with such a cute girl. I'm so nervous, I can't think straight."

"Well, she is cute. That's something I noticed too."

"Mm, it's not just that she's cute either you know. She's a wonderful girl. How should I say this…Maybe pure… or too pure, so it's more like kind of worrisome…"

"…Hmm…"

Knitting his brow and lifting his glasses to his forehead, Kitamura rubbed his seemingly exhausted eyes while at a rare loss for words. Then gently touching Ryūji's back,

"Come with me for a second, will you? Just for a bit..."

“Hey, where are you going? The bathroom? You're not going back to your seat, are you?"

"Don't worry so much...Anyway, get down."

Facing in the opposite direction of the bathroom, he started moving towards the customer seating. Then bending over, he concealed himself behind a decorative plant and then hid behind the divider between smoking and nonsmoking sections. Ryūji could only follow his lead. Making their way in a roundabout manner, they ended up directly behind the seat where Taiga and Ami were sitting. The two girls were clearly visible but shouldn’t be able see the two hiding in their blind spot.

"…Wait, just what do you think you're doing, you pervert?"

"It’s fine. Quiet down and watch."

Where Kitamura was pointing his finger, Ami relaxedly crossed her legs and draped her arms across the back of the sofa.

"Haa, so tired. Hey, hey, Ami-chan's really thirsty~. Bring me an iced tea, won't you?"

Flipping her beautiful hair and then resting her head in her hand exhaustedly, Ami rudely pushed the cup in front of her towards Taiga.

"…"

Without altering her expression, Taiga threw Ami a look before turning back to her own knees. The one who lightly clicked her tongue wasn't Taiga, but Ami.

"Hmm? Such a useless, or maybe I should say depressing, fellow…You've got a bad attitude, don't you ? Oh well, whatever. When Yūsaku gets back, I'll just get him to bring it for me. Or you know, maybe I'll ask that mean-looking weird guy. He's so nervous it seems he'd do just about anything Ami-chan says."

While speaking in a sickeningly sweet voice, her strawberry-colored lips twisted slightly. Even so, her chaste appearance didn't disappear or falter. Then without even facing Taiga, who was silent like a doll nearby, she recklessly asked.

"Hey, hey. About him, is he your boyfriend?"

"..."

"Would you mind if Ami-chan took him from you? Even though I don't need him at all."

"…"

"Or maybe I should say, he has the look of a present-day delinquent? I bet you often get together with those kinds of losers~ Respect yourself a little."

"…"

Without opening her mouth, Taiga just directed an empty stare at Ami.

"Hmm, I see. It's just the best you could do in this good-for-nothing place. Ah, that's, the, worst."

Speaking in a singsong manner, it seemed like Ami wasn't going to wait for Taiga to reply or anything anymore. Roughly taking her brand-name bag, she pulled out a large hand mirror and started staring at her own pretty face. Then once again straightforward, ' Ami-chan's so cute' ---While murmuring happily, she gave a smile of satisfaction.

"Aah, I really want to go out and play already…You, just what do you two normally do for fun? Run around crazily?"

"…He's not my boyfriend."

Anyone who actually knew Taiga would have trembled at her flat, nearly emotionless whisper.

"Ah, so tha~t's how it is. Hm, whatever, I don't really care~. Well, isn't that right~, about that delinquent…Are you saying he's simply impossible? Or are you saying Ami-chan might be a little interested in such a drastically different person?"

Ami snorted mockingly while staring at herself in the mirror. Then, suddenly shifting her eyes away from the mirror, she directed a rude glance at Taiga.

"Hey, hey, how tall are you? I noticed it just now, but aren't your proportions funny?"

"…"

At the same time, she slowly scrutinized Taiga from head to toe and raised her eyebrows as though amazed.

"Fu~n, so there are shops that sell such small clothes. But you know, when you buy something like jeans, wouldn't you have to cut the bottom? Ami-chan's never had to cut them even once, so I wouldn't know."

"---That's just how her true character is."

"Tr, true character?"

"Yeah. That is Ami's alternate personality from even before she started kindergarten. Dependent, selfish, and oppressive; the stereotypical selfish princess."

Trembling while looking at his best friend's face, Ryūji nearly crushed the leaf from the decorative plant he had been clutching.

"Her personality's so horrible…What's with the ' Ami-chan'? That's scary! It's like she's possessed by a demon."

"…Right?"

In all his life, he had never seen a girl who said those kinds of things...Actually, there might have been some in his own class, but at least for Ryūji, who had basically never approached a girl, it was the first time he had actually witnessed one himself. The Taiga with whom he passed his everyday life certainly had a bad sort of personality, but he got the feeling that Ami's nature was bad in a different way. Knowing the whole situation, there might have even been some kind of sympathy for her, but it seemed that Taiga was still more reasonable.

"Based on appearances alone, Ami would be okay, but …I guess there's a defect in her personality. Whenever she's with people she regards poorly, her other personality ends up manifesting. Those people, they're generally women."

"…I, is this the kind of thing where she thinks she needs to go that far because she's a model?"

"It's more like she's been putting on a front since after she started modeling, I think. If you ask me, she's still the same rather than having two sides."

"Well that's…hmm."

While slightly tilting his head at his best friend's words, Ryūji leaned forward expectantly.

What's going on, Palmtop Tiger?

"That Taiga, is she just going to sit there and take that?"

Or rather, please hurry up and tell her that he's not a delinquent---Biting his lip while his eyes reflected a harsh glare, Ryūji looked back and forth between the two girls. Taiga remained silent with a stoic expression.

"C, could it be she's holding back just because that girl is Kitamura's childhood friend?"

Holding back were two words that just totally didn't suit Taiga, but she was completely vulnerable when it came to Kitamura. That must have definitely been the case as he couldn't think of any other reason for her silence, which is what he thought at that moment.

Then right before Ryūji's eyes, the situation suddenly burst. That is, what's generally known as 'a slap in the face'.

"…"

It seemed that Ami, who kept her expression calm and her eyes open, couldn't even speak.

"A mosquito. There was a mosquito."

Nearby, the tiger who had suddenly shown her fangs wore a concealed smirk. Her red tongue protruded from her mouth for only an instant.

"How fortunate, your cheek was nearly bitten by this mosquito. Huh, this is a fly."

"Ehh?"

Abruptly extending her small open hand, there was the slaughtered corpse of a fly. Upon seeing it, Ami's face immediately tinged red. Naturally,

"W, w, what the heck are you doing?!"

She was outraged. However, Taiga just sneered at her reaction exasperatedly.

"Even though I did it as a favor for you. You don't know how to be grateful."

"A favor?!"

Ami's voice was nearing supersonic levels. It was drawing attention from the nearby customers.

"That just isn't true, is it?! Isn't there something wrong with you?! Unbelievable, what's with this, horrible, you're the wo~rst! You know, I didn't even want to come here or anything!"

"…You're so noisy."

A single crease could be seen on Taiga's forehead. Harshly scrutinizing with shining eyes, her blood-red aura rose up. "Che," she clicked her tongue succinctly, and her malicious shot was ready to go.

"Shut up, you damn brat."

Shooting such harsh words with the sharpness of a slashing sword, she put an end to Ami's ranting.---It was the end of the match.

"…U,…Uw,…Uw…"

Ami's slender shoulders started trembling with each breath. As her pretty face scrunched, 'Ah, this is no good' ---Kitamura muttered and stood, and followed by Ryūji, quickly walked back to their seats amidst the overly awkward situation.

Then, the instant the two boys arrived,

"Yu,"

Like in a girls' comic, Ami's back as she turned around was a flower blossoming into full-bloom---or at least that' s what he felt. It was just that extreme as Ami wonderfully, dramatically,

"Yūsakuuu~! Fwaaaah!"

She leapt to Kitamura's chest while crying.

Her shoulders wracking with sobs, she redundantly voiced her complaint with childlike ineloquence, 'I want to go home', and looked up at Kitamura point-blank with her tear-filled eyes.

"Aaaah…Just why can't you guys get along? Seriously …You were so loud and troublesome, Aisaka. Even you, Takasu. I'm going to take Ami home."

With his head down, his eyebrows drooping, and just looking apologetic overall, Kitamura held onto Ami as he deftly picked up her bag from the seat. Then, ignoring the glances of the other customers, he dragged her like that to the exit.

Afterwards, that just left,

"...Ta,...Taiga...?"

"..."

"…Hey, keep it together!"

‘Won the game, but lost the match’, that was what was written all over Taiga’s face.

Her lips expressed the tiniest bit of displeasure while her eyes remained empty, Taiga was just like a Buddha statue…She was completely silent. It might have gotten to the point where words of comfort would be useless.

"Well, um…It’s me. Cheer up."

"…"

"Simply put, Kitamura and I were watching the whole thing. Kitamura definitely doesn’t think that you were bullying her or anything."

"…Well then, even after seeing all that, Kitamura-kun still acceptingly protected that girl and took her home."

"…He probably wasn’t protecting her."

"…He was holding her gently, comforting her."

"…He wasn't comforting her, I think, but…Oh!"

There was a waitress's scream at the same time as the sound of glass breaking. The dish had fallen to the floor and shattered into a number of pieces, and as though feeling something, the brats in that place who had until just then been clamoring happily, suddenly burst into tears screaming 'Gwaah!'. That was followed by screams of 'Kyaah!' and 'Uwaah!' as the milk steamer broke down and started spurting wildly with droplets of boiled milk scattering the customers who had been in line, then 'Manager! The bathroom is full…Uwaaah~!'…The voice of the employee who didn't want to see what was happening resounded and disappeared.

"…I hate her, that woman!"

--From all over Taiga's body, she was releasing a dreadfully intense killing intent resembling lightning that sent blue sparks flying. Ryūji just couldn't do anything in that situation. Taiga's thoroughly chewed lips had lost most of their color, and her tightly clenched fists were trembling, then,

"Uwa! Don't cry!"

"…~"

If at least Kitamura was here, there would have been the chance for a new development. As it was, Taiga's eyes started to well up with tears.

"There are people watching, you know, try to bear with it!"

"Uuh…"

Moaning bitterly, Taiga rubbed her eyes with her sleeves. It ended up being something troublesome. Then Ryūji, who just wanted to cover his head, heard something wonderful.

"Eh? What's wrong?"

"…Minorin…"

From out of nowhere, Minori appeared still clad in her uniform. Widening her eyes in surprise,

"Taiga, you don't look so good. Did something happen ?"

"…It's nothing…I, I'm going to wash my hands. I touched something dirty."

"Ooh, it's a dead fly."

She moved out of the way of Taiga, who was standing while showing her palm. Like that, Minori watched her from behind for a while before slowly turning towards Ryūji.

"…That girl, what's wrong? Did something happen while I was on break?"

"…Not really…Well, there was a bit of trouble."

His faltering speech wasn't only due to nervousness; he was also trying to figure out how he should explain what just happened. He wondered, out of all the possible timings, why she had to be on break just then. With a worried look, the nearly unflappable Minori spoke,

"I don't know what happened, but she was quite mad, wasn't she…It's unusual for the docile Taiga."

"Eh…Docile?!"

He wondered why.

That is, on this day, it was at that moment Ryūji felt an even greater sense of dread.

* * *

Despite all this, they finished the shopping and returned to the Takasu residence, where as Ryūji was starting to wash the rice, Taiga returned to her usual self.

"…I probably won't even meet her a second time. Because it doesn't seem like she and Kitamura-kun are going out. And anyway, getting involved with her is beneath me."

"Is two liters enough? Should I go ahead and make two and a half?"

"Two and a half."

Her face showed signs of discontent, but Taiga spoke while playing with the sugar jar in the corner of the kitchen.

"…When I become an adult, I should be able to handle this anger more steadily."

"This coming from someone who goes so far as to slap someone else in the face?...Hey, don’t play with the sugar ."

"…"

"Don’t lick the sugar spoon!"

Chapter 2

With vacation over, the next shock came early the following morning.

It was just a bit past eight in the morning.

Their homeroom teacher arrived earlier than ever, and homeroom started ahead of time as well,

"Ooh…"

---All hell had broken loose.

This just might be the kind of situation where that phrase applies. Unable to stop himself from crying out, Ryūji sat in disbelief. It was hard to believe, or rather, he didn’t want to believe it. But, it didn’t seem like it was a dream.

With his mouth agape, he turned around to face Kitamura and rapidly exclaimed, "I never heard anything about this," but Kitamura just casually raised his hand with a "Hey" and a nonchalant expression.

Anyway, he couldn’t just ignore reality.

Partially frozen, Ryūji's gaze was three-times worse than usual and he could do nothing but accept the hellish situation as it was.

The source of Ryūji's distress walked up to the class platform with slender legs and beautiful hair that swayed with each step.

Looking straight ahead with a little embarrassment, her smile almost blended in perfectly amidst the gentle morning sunlight. Sure enough, while slowly raising her eyes---

"Starting today, I'll be a student here at this school; my name is Ami Kawashima. Please look after me."

---An emphatically pure and genuine looking visage.

This is ridiculous.

"…How, did things, like this..."

No one paid any attention to the moaning voice. And so oblivious to Ryūji who was in shock, the rest of the class continued on,

"E, eh, that girl, didn't she appear in a magazine?!"

"What?! Really?! But, she's really cute!"

"No way", "It's gotta be a lie", "Incredible, that's incredible"…The girls who liked to follow trends were in the middle of making a big fuss. Nearly all the guys, on the other hand, were acting suspiciously subdued, remaining oddly silent and just staring enraptured with passionate eyes at the pure angel on the platform. Noto Hisamitsu, Ryūji's friend who wore black-rimmed glasses and sat a bit in front and off to the side, very slowly turned around,

"Jackpot…!"

Murmuring warmly as if delighted from the bottom of his heart, Noto looked at Ryūji and tightly clenched his fist.

"…Y, yea…"

Ryūji replied vaguely, but rather than clench his fist back, he simply gulped.

Ami looked beautiful upon the platform. Her skin seemed even smoother and fairer than yesterday; and her large jewel-like eyes seemed to be shining even brighter

than yesterday. Without forgetting to smile, she tilted her head as she looked over the class. Her somewhat immature appearance was most likely due to her petite chin, but she had a perfect eight-head figure. Ami was the absolute epitome of beauty, almost to the point of obscuring his sense of reality. Ryūji's headache had also become absolute.

He covertly turned his head to look at a seat somewhere towards the center of the class. Right now, the person who should be experiencing the worst shock was sitting over in that direction. That would be the one called Taiga.

He spotted her.

Then,

"…Oh…"

He immediately turned away. She was making a face that shouldn't be seen.

Her eyebrows were raised nearly vertical and her eyes had clouded over moistly, looking as though they had liquefied into a thickly bubbling lava flow. Her lips that were just like a rose trembled visibly and were turned up

ominously; her face was puffed out as if she were holding a bomb in her mouth, possibly a manifestation of her barely contained fury directed against the real world that she couldn't stand. It seemed as if a weak-bodied person might die simply from meeting her gaze.

From where she stood, Ami could also probably notice Taiga volleying her serious killing intent from the middle of the classroom. Just for an instant, Ami raised her eyebrows ever so slightly. However, she acted just as one would expect of a professional who was used to the public eye.

"Everyone! Please call me Ami!"

Flawlessly pretending to be oblivious, she smiled prettily and wholeheartedly. But that action alone was more than enough to inspire dread in Ryūji. *Women, were they all like this?* Shuddering from a sudden chill, he instinctively fastened a button on his open gakuran uniform.

"Everyone! Let's get along with our new friend! Now, let's welcome her!"

Strangely discernible from the welcoming applause, their homeroom teacher and well-established

bachelorette, Yuri Koigakubo (29), raised her voice. Wrapping an arm around Ami's shoulder with overfamiliarity, "They're all good kids, so you'll get along right away!", she exclaimed while striking a victory pose…He wondered if something had happened over the break, as her personality seemed to have completely changed. She used to wear fashionable pink ensembles, but at the moment she was wearing a rough hooded jersey,

"Well then, it's a fresh start for Class 2-C~!"

She gave a vigorous thumbs up.

"…Tch."

It seemed even a tongue click from Taiga, who was giving off a suffocating aura of displeasure while looking up from below, wasn't enough to phase her today.

"…Hey, stop it with that kind of noise! Try smiling happily for one day at least!"

"…Tch."

"…Just for today if you can, to welcome our new friend."

"…Tch."

Nugunuguu---Reduced to making sounds without articulating, she suddenly clutched her head. Then almost as if doing a somersault, she spun around ending up at her desk seeming depressed and hiding her face in her arms.

"M, Miss Yuri…?"

"Um, are you all right…?"

Not surprisingly, the classroom was pretty much silenced by the scene, while Ami, who stood nearby, no longer smiled as she watched. The bachelorette finally looked up, after a full fifteen seconds had passed. While trembling a little and hanging her head just a bit, she sounded regretful as, with some difficulty, she started talking about her private affairs.

"…During the break, I, my last chance…the very last one,…it ended in failure…~! So, I thought I'd have to try my best, I'd need to work hard at my job, but, but…Just forget it! It's not like any of you will understand anyway! You guys, I'm sure you'll understand when you're older, so…! Kitamura-kun, please take care of the rest!"

"Well then."

Having been called upon, Kitamura got to his feet and, turning around to face the class, spoke,

"Everybody, please listen to me. Ami is actually a friend of mine from some time ago. I had no idea she was going to transfer to our class, but please try to get along. Well, that's all for this morning's homeroom. Stand! Bow! "

'Enough already~'---Like an explosion, the bachelorette's pitiable moan burst amidst the noisy classroom before fading into nothingness.

* * *

"Ka, Kawashima-san, shall I move it?!"

"No, let me!"

"I'll move it for you, definitely!"

"No, no, choose me! Or rather, just sit back and leave it to me."

In an instant, a crowd of boys moved into Ami's vicinity, who in turn was about to move her desk and chair. The more reserved ones watched the crowd from a distance looking jealous. It seemed like everyone wanted to get to know her one way or another, but whether they were nearby or far away was just a matter of assertiveness.

"It's fine, fine! I can do this much by myself at least! It's not like I'm that weak, you know!"

So without asking anyone for help, Ami exclaimed ' Yoisho!' and lifted her desk with her slender arms.

"Ah, watch out!"

"Kawashima-san, let us help!"

"I said it's fine, so stop worrying!"

Weaving through the crowd of guys wanting to lend a hand, she quickly moved on her own,

"…See! Didn't I tell you? This much is no problem."

Having placed her desk and chair in the designated spot, she smiled a happily angelic smile. With that turn of events the boys quickly lost their pretense for talking with her. They left reluctantly while calmly saying, "If anything comes up, we'll help you!", and were replaced by some girls who approached Ami.

"Ehh, Kawashima-san, you moved this by yourself? You could have just asked the guys to do it."

"That's right, that's right, or more like, I get the feeling that all those guys desperately wanted to talk with Kawashima-san. They'd be happy if you made use of them, I'm sure."

Facing the girls with an even brighter smile than the one she had shown the boys, Ami waved her hands in front of her face playfully.

"It's fine~, since something like this is easy!...Or so I said but, just between us, I'm actually the type that ends up getting really nervous when talking with boys."

"Eh, really?"

"Really. More than that, thanks for coming to talk with me! This is the first time girls have come to talk to me, I'm so happy! It's fine if you just call me Ami, you know!"

After politely saying those kinds of things, she was about to sit in her seat when,

"O-ow!"

She banged her shin against the leg of her desk. With her face contorted, almost to the point of being comical, Ami appeared to be in serious pain.

"Ahh, geez! How uncool! Even though I wanted to go with a fashionably styled image since I took the trouble to transfer here. I guess I'm just the laughable type after all~!"

In response to Ami's self-deprecating style of speech, the girls spoke up as they laughed.

"Kawashima-san…I mean, Ami-chan, could you actually be a real klutz?"

"Somehow, it just seems so natural! Geez, even though you're fortunate enough to be cute, why are you making such a funny face?"

"Don't say it's funny or anything like that~! I really planned on being fashionably cool~!"

Hahahahaha~---It went something like that.

Meanwhile, resting his chin on his hands as he sat near the window, Ryūji silently stared at the circle of excitement centered around Ami. Missing their usual glint, his eyes were unusually empty as he wondered, *So she can also put on this kind of act?*. For some reason he had managed to become a little distrustful of girls.

As he pondered about that, he accidentally ended up meeting Ami's gaze. While uttering an 'Ah' from her partially open mouth, Ami blinked her large eyes as if surprised. Ryūji wondered if she had really just now realized that he was in the very same classroom without even noticing Taiga. Ami pointed a slim finger at Ryūji,

"Ehh, no way! Isn't that Takasu-kun?"

"…"

It was completely on reflex.

Reflexively, he ended up turning his face away as if he hadn't heard anything. It looked exactly as if he was turning away from something unpleasant. Though it was only for a moment, he wondered if he had left an excessively bad impression …but he didn't have the confidence to look at Ami again. So as he maintained his forced inattention, Ryūji could only listen as the girls continued their busy conversation.

"Ami-chan, you're acquainted with Ryūji Takasu?! How?!"

"Well, when I went to a family restaurant with Yūsaku, we met by chance and were introduced, but…for some reason, it seems like I might be disliked? Just look, I'm being snubbed right now…"

She might have intended to be discreet, but Ami's voice easily made it all the way to Ryūji's ears. No, perhaps she was intentionally letting him hear her…For Ami to do something like that, he probably shouldn't be the least bit surprised.

"Ehh, about Takasu, he's just an asocial guy, so it's not like he hates you or anything. I'm sure he's just being shy ."

"That's right, before we became classmates, we all definitely thought he was a major delinquent and were too scared to go near him because of his constantly scary expression, you know."

---'He seemed bad because of his unsociable demeanor. ' Ryūji just stared out the window, but privately, that really hurt his feelings.

"So Takasu-kun's not really bad or anything?"

"He's just kind of different. The first years and other students from other classes seem like they're still scared of him, but Ami-chan doesn't need to worry about any of that!"

"Yep yep!"

"Ehh…So that's how it is…"

Fu~n…He could feel an appraising glance on the back of his neck. Like an unbearable itch, the sound of their

voices brushed against his neck. He became unable to pretend he wasn't listening, though it was for just a moment. He was shifting his back against the itch when he ended up inadvertently looking at Ami.

Thereafter---Ami smiled faintly. Agitated, Ryūji's expression took on a gleam like that of a sharp knife.

While they had certainly only connected for a moment, Ami's eyes were apparently moist.

Immediately facing the girls with a smile, she went right back to their group, but…somehow she seemed to be embedded with an unspeakable sadness. As if it had been burned into his retina, he couldn't erase the image from his memory. Rather than anger or bitterness, the expression of anxiety as she looked at him vividly remained for some time. Still amidst the group of cheery people, Ami's eyes were cast with a dull light like the reflection off a still pool of water. Looking exactly as if she was secretly tearing up, he got the feeling he could hear her voicelessly speak. 'Hey, why are you being so cold to me…?'

"…N, no, that wasn't my intention…it really wasn't."

Shaking his head vigorously, Ryūji erased the afterimage from his head. It wasn't like that, it wasn't, it probably wasn't.

Even though he should know how dreadful her beauty was, having already witnessed her true character yesterday, he was on the verge of being tricked by her chastely beautiful façade.

Pulling himself together and standing up, he went over to Kitamura's desk. As it was, he couldn't even be sure that what he remembered of yesterday's events wasn't just a dream...He could easily believe that. He needed to talk with someone else who had also witnessed what happened.

"Hey, Kitamura…Isn't that remarkable?"

When Ryūji indicated Ami and the others with a flick of his head as he spoke, Kitamura gave the rambunctious group a glance before sighing with a bitter smile.

"Ah. As expected, she really knows how to get people's sympathy, doesn't she."

"…Why didn't you tell me yesterday about the transfer ?"

"Hmm? I didn't?"

"Don't play around. I was really surprised, seriously."

Leaning against Kitamura's desk, Ryūji reprimanded his best friend in a quiet voice. His eyes were extremely intense as he glared at Kitamura, but of course, Kitamura was aware that Ryūji wasn't doing it on purpose. Kitamura lightly scratched his head and laughed,

"My bad, sorry. How should I put this…I'm hoping that Ami will get along with people properly while remaining her natural self. So, when we met yesterday, I opted to not mention that you guys would be attending the same high school. I knew that if I had, she would have put on a complete front and then become immediately deceptive."

"…Isn't that just what she did yesterday anyway."

"She showed her actual nature to Aisaka at least. And so Ryūji, you saw it too. Right?"

"Could you possibly want to expose Ami's true personality? She'll just be despised for it."

"I don't plan to spread it around, of course. I have no right to do that after all. But, I hope that it eventually gets out. It will surely be better than the deception, for Ami as well.---If she is despised as a result of it, maybe it'll convince her."

"…Convince her, you say …I don't really get what you mean."

"Is that so? Hm, and I thought what I said was easy to understand..."

Taking off his glasses and wiping them with a cloth, Kitamura gave Ryūji a glance with his unexpectedly large eyes.

"I don't hate Ami's real self at all. It's all the deception that I want to end. I think it's best for people to just be themselves. To tell you the truth, it makes me a little sad now when she greets me with that facade…About when she started modeling, she suddenly started doing that good girl act even to me…Anyway, I think it would be nice if more people would like Ami for who she really is. That's kind of what I meant."

Looking into the eyes of this passionately idealistic and just man, Ryūji couldn't reply for some reason. Even though there was just one thing that he wanted to say.

It's probably impossible. That's all.

The automated juice vending machine was meant to be used only during afternoon recess, but it was fine as long as none of the stricter teachers noticed. Especially with the second year classrooms being very close to the separate two-story building with the vending machines, students violated the rule all the time.

Soon after third period math ended, Ryūji left the classroom with some pocket change, intending to violate that very rule and get a drink. He had some lukewarm tea he brought from home, but today had been unexpectedly stressful. He needed to do at least this much to relax.

In the separate building he quickly walked down the empty corridor before stopping in front of the three vending machines lined up side by side near the stair landing. Should he get a can of coffee or soda; while

stingily counting his change, it was time to make his selection.

"Excuse me!"

A white hand that suddenly appeared from the side was blocking Ryūji while putting coins into the machine. Surprised by the interruption, he turned around,

"…Oh…"

And was even more surprised.

"Ehe, so the vending machines were in this kind of place, were they?"

An angelically innocent smile was blooming directly in front of him.

The one sweetly smiling while looking at Ryūji was the source of his stress---Ami.

Tilting her head while her eyes sparkled,

"I wonder what Takasu-kun planned to get. Let me try to guess, hmm…How about this one?"

Out of all the possible choices, she selected the nastiest looking energy drink and pointed at its picture with her pink-colored fingernail.

"Eh?!...No…That…C, coffee, actually."

After he replied in a shamefully nervous and excited tone of voice, Ami said ‘I see’, nodded once, and pushed the button for coffee. Then she turned to Ryūji and presented him with the can that had rolled out noisily.

"Here you go. It’s my treat. Actually, I saw Takasu-kun leave the classroom, and I followed you here."

"Huh? W, why?"

As he was rigid and unable to understand just what was going on, the can was deftly placed into his hands. Ami put some more coins in without replying to him,

"I wonder which one I should get…Maybe this one?"

After a bit of meandering, she pushed the button for straight tea. The sound of the falling can brought him back to reality, but it was already too late,

"Ah, wait a second! Here, buy it with this!"

He hurriedly tried to give her his change, but Ami had already put her money into the machine a while ago. Then, looking up.

"Well, I bought it already."

Sticking her tongue out a little, she shrugged while making a mischievous expression.

"No, that's no good. This just isn't right. Take this coffee instead then."

"No way, it's fine, it's fine! Think of this as an apology for yesterday."

"Apology, you say…"

"Hey, why don't we drink right here?"

With these words, Ami quickly pulled the tab on her can open, and without listening for Ryūji's response, she took a sip of her illegally obtained drink.

With things as they were, he expectedly couldn't just leave her behind when it was her first day after transferring.

"…Buying a drink when it's not afternoon recess, that's a violation of school rules."

"Is that so? But, I don't want to be told that by Takasu-kun, since the one who came to do so was Takasu-kun."

"…I suppose that's true. Thanks…Itadakimasu."

Ryūji couldn't do anything but start drinking his coffee with her. While the two of them were drinking, it became quiet except for the low hum of the vending machines, which resounded with a hint of melancholy. Trying to hide his discomfort, he gave Ami a sidelong glance but couldn't get himself to speak first. He just couldn't figure out what he should talk about. So of course at a time like this, no other students or strict teachers showed up.

"Whew…It's cold. It's really good when it's chilled."

Wiping her wet lips with the end of her finger, the one who started speaking was Ami. Side by side with Ryūji, she leaned against one of the vending machines,

"That aside, I was pretty surprised to find out I'm in the same class as Takasu-kun. Even Aisaka's there… Yūsaku, he didn't say anything at all about that yesterday."

She smiled amiably as if saying 'Right?'. But Ryūji, while vaguely nodding, could only return a stiff facial expression. Of course his eyes also ended up becoming more wild. Even setting aside Ami's actual personality, he was suddenly alone with an extremely pretty girl that he wasn't all that familiar with, which made him feel constricted.

However, Ryūji wasn't sure how Ami perceived his response.

"…Hey, Takasu-kun."

She moved from his side and stood directly in front of him. With her gently shining eyes discreetly raised and her eyelashes weakly trembling, she whispered roughly.

"…By any chance, I wonder if you heard anything from Aisaka-san…Even though there isn't really

anything I can do if you were told…But, you know. I hope you'll just forget about yesterday. This is…also for Aisaka-san's sake."

"Y,…Yesterday you say, what do you mean?"

Nervous from being face to face, Ryūji took a step back wanting to desperately escape, but his back was met with resistance from the vending machines. Ami made such an effort futile anyway by moving forward a half step. She wasn't fazed at all by his bad expression. So what she meant about yesterday was, 'the family restaurant', ' the slap in the face', and 'the breaking down and crying'; it was probably about those three points---

"I'm wondering… did Takasu-kun hear from Aisaka-san about what happened?"

Ami's searching eyes, which somehow sparkled reminiscently of that Chihuahua from the commercials, were clouding over and even now looked as if they might start shedding tears at any second. He was desperately trying to come up with the best possible answer with a mind that had gone totally blank while continuing to look away from Ami's sad pretty face.

"N, no…I didn't hear anything."

He muttered it sincerely since it was technically true. The fickle angel holding her hands out in front of him was the liar. Though he justified himself thusly, the answer he replied with wasn't actually a lie anyway. He had seen it all with his own eyes, so he didn't need Taiga to tell him anything.

"…Really? I was so sure that you had…but maybe I was mistaken. If that's the case, I still want to say some things…About yesterday, it was totally my fault. Aisaka-san didn't do anything bad at all."

Her Chihuahua-like teary eyes were sparkling as she gently blinked.

"Hey maybe, that…I, I think that maybe because I seem kind of air-headed that I was making Aisaka-san irritated…Aisaka-san, when we were talking, she'd suddenly become really emotional and said all sorts of things that I didn't really understand, like 'conceited' and 'getting caught up in the moment'…I ended up panicking. Like 'Eh? Eh? Why?', just that sort of thing… so…"

What nerve, to make that kind of expression as she told such a story suited for her own benefit---Feeling that

minor chill again, he gave a small sigh of near amazement. Interrupting him,

"…So! Aisaka-san didn't do anything wrong."

Ami shook her head. Her Chihuahua-like eyes were shining even more and more,

"I…If I was more…If only I was a more level-headed person…So, I want you to forget about it. That…The truth is…Really you know, girls saying weird things all of a sudden like that, it's…normal…So! I'm not going to worry about that kind of thing! It's fine! I'll keep trying my best!"

I'm the victim!---Ami was pleading that with her entire self when the bell started ringing. Speechlessly watching Ami's theatrical display, Ryūji felt like he had been saved .

"T, that's the bell. We have to get back to the classroom …Come on, finish your drink. I understand what Kawashima wanted to say."

Haa, he certainly understood. In other words, Ami had come all that way to make excuses for herself and to keep him from talking.

As if swallowing his uncertainty, Ryūji drank the rest of his coffee in one go. He momentarily narrowed his eyes intently at Ami's somewhat satisfied looking smile.

"We have to hurry or we'll be late for class!"

With a couple gulps, she similarly drank what was left of her iced tea in one go. After disposing of the empty cans in a trashcan, they took off down the corridor side by side.

"…Hey, Takasu-kun. You'll promise me now, right? That you won't say anything about this to anyone, right? That is---I'm really sorry that I ended up crying yesterday."

Ami's teary Chihuahua-like eyes were searching for reassurance. Ryūji deceptively nodded any number of times,

"I get it…I get it already. C, come on, hurry up."

Shaking off the sudden onset of fatigue, Ryūji moved forward and continued to run in front of Ami. Because of

that, he wasn't able to see it. Ami, who was running behind him, gave a small laugh as if to say, 'This guy, he's such a simpleton'.

However, even if he had noticed, it's not like he would have been at all surprised by it.

[Why did you get back to the classroom at the last second with Ami Kawashima?]

It came as the teacher had her back turned since she was writing on the blackboard.

A scrap of paper that someone else had recklessly thrown onto Ryūji's desk had those words written in pink ink. There wasn't a name on it, but he could recognize the neurotic handwriting.

He knew he was right when he looked towards the center seats. Looking visibly displeased with her mouth in the shape of an upside down V, Taiga was looking right at him. With cold forsaking eyes Taiga whispered, arrogantly mouthing 'Reply'.

Did he really have any obligation to reply or anything---He wasn't sure how he should write about what just happened, and to begin with, he certainly didn't want to get dragged into their little quarrel. He pocketed the piece of paper in a way that Taiga could see him do it and pulled the textbook he had out closer to himself. Like that, he planned to show her that he wasn't going to be replying.

However, in his peripheral view, Taiga was making an underhanded throwing motion…

"…Ah!"

…By the time he noticed, it was too late. Well, it was late, but he was still saved.

Coincidentally, he had been scratching his head while holding a leather-bound pencase in hand. It was sudden---the pencase was pierced easily by a mechanical pencil dart. Really, it could easily have been the center of his forehead that was pierced. The four students who unfortunately happened to be sitting between Ryūji and Taiga were all equally surprised, wearing stiff expressions as they looked for the shot that had just missed them.

"Wh…What the heck was that…"

She intends to kill. This girl, she really wants to kill me. Going 'Che, how disappointing', Taiga nevertheless kept a calm face…she snapped her fingers while making that cold and apathetic expression.

Staring at Taiga with rabid-looking eyes, Ryūji swore resolutely in his heart that he absolutely wouldn't reply. Just who was the one with the bad split personality; if you tried asking Ryūji, he wouldn't be able to say for sure. They were just about equally troublesome.

He caught a glimpse of Taiga mouthing her complaints , but he had no desire to get involved with her. First of all , if he went ahead and relayed what Ami had told him moments ago to Taiga, it was obvious that he'd just be adding fuel to their already treacherous dispute.

Deciding that he would try to completely ignore the situation, he casually started building a barrier around his desk with his textbooks and notebooks. He planned to use them as a defense against that violent girl's troublesome attacks.

However, a few minutes passed. Again while the teacher's back was turned, a folded piece of paper was thrown onto his desk by someone in front of him. Thinking it might be Taiga again, he was just about to throw it away, but,

"…Oh…"

TO: Takasu-kun

FROM: Minori

---He ended up seeing those words, and something akin to a sigh escaped from his throat. When he looked to the opposite side of the classroom, he even saw Minori going 'He~y' while looking his way and waving her small hand from her seat near the hallway.

Frantically waving back silently, Ryūji gingerly opened the note with trembling fingers. He didn't want to rip it…and he didn't want to get it dirty…After all, this was the first time in his entire life that he had received a letter from the girl he liked. It may have just been a small scrap of paper, but even so, this was the

treasure of a lifetime for him. Even when he becomes an old man, he was absolutely certain he wouldn't forget this day and this moment in time.

However.

[Now look here, Takasu-kun! Minori is seriously angry you know!]

What's with this beginning paragraph…? Ryūji swallowed with a bitter taste in his mouth.

[I heard from Taiga; isn't Takasu-kun being kind of suspicious with that transfer student?! I already told you before on the rooftop you know, that if you toss Taiga aside …I'll punish you~!

]

…That's how the first half went.

There was actually a skull mark on the very first letter he was fortunate enough to receive from the girl he liked. He continued on to read the latter half as he tried to stifle his incredulity.

[I'm just saying this in case, you know; that transfer student is certainly a very cute girl. But you know, things that are perfect, they're not really interesting, right? As proof, my ever-insatiable Minorin Radar (my detector for sweet girls), it's not responding this time even a bit.]

Well, that's probably not the problem…Ami Kawashima is interesting…in a way… Rather than that… that bothersome Taiga had tattled to Kushieda. So she's not only violent but a coward as well. He glanced sideways at Taiga, but she was giving him the cold shoulder, facing the other way and completely ignoring him. Her back was giving off a thick violent aura that said 'You're the one at fault, you know'.

Chewing his lips that were dry with an inexpressible anger, Ryūji still used a steady hand to tear a perfect

square of paper from one of his notebooks. He'd make his objection to Taiga later, but for now anyway, he needed to reply to Minori.

To Kushieda

From Takasu

[There isn't anything suspicious going on between me and the transfer student, but before that, there's nothing between me and Taiga either.]

He wrote that much with carefully arranged letters, then thought a bit,

[Anyway, excuse me for completely changing the subject. What does Kushieda think about people who label themselves naturally air-headed?]

…He tried to pad it a little like that. For some reason, he wanted to try asking her that question. Also, it seemed like she might get a little angry if he just wrote one sentence the first time, and it didn't even seem very well put. In an email conversation, putting in questions would invariably help keep things going well. But this wasn't email.

Aggressively hiding the throbbing feeling that was nearly bursting from him, Ryūji passed his return note to the guy in the seat in front of him. Each time the teacher wrote on the blackboard or glanced at the textbook, his note made its way to Minori bit by bit---Soon enough a few minutes later, it arrived safely into her hands.

He was staring as she opened up his note, worrying futilely and wondering what in the world she was thinking when Minori slowly turned to face Ryūji and stood up. The teacher had her back turned and was in the middle of writing a bunch of things on the board, but Ryūji, Taiga, Kitamura, Ami, and pretty much all the other students had surprised looks on their faces and ended up staring almost involuntarily at the standing Minori.

Minori closed her eyes and, reminiscent of the crucified Christ, raised both hands so very slowly while wearing a peaceful expression. Her expression that had been like that of a dead person very, very slowly shifted into a smile. Her hands ended up making a large circle over her head…at least, that's what it looked like at that moment.

Kuwa~!

With her face crinkled and her mouth opened as if she were crying out, both her hands crossed violently in a slashing motion. They ended up forming an X.

"Umm, and so…"

At the same time that the teacher turned around, Minori was already sitting in her seat acting as if nothing had happened. It might have seemed as if a single giant question mark was looming collectively over the students' heads.

That X was probably the answer to the latter half of his letter…Ryūji was puzzling over what just happened as well. He just seriously hoped that she wasn't making that X in regards to the first half.

Then he thought. You might call a person like her naturally air-headed.

* * *

Even though Ami is such a beautiful person, she wasn't prideful at all, she was easy to talk to, and just an overall good person!

…The overall opinion of the class unified like that before the period even ended.

There were a lot of guys who were trying to help Ami on her first day, and so no matter who it was, she would gladly say 'Will you teach me this? Thanks!', 'Ah, so that's how it is~! I'm so glad, you really saved me~!', 'Eh~, I'm so happy that I could talk with everyone~!'…Slyly putting on such a convincing smile, she showered her affection indiscriminately with a shining aura like that of an overly pure angel.

The three who were aware of Ami's true nature were Kitamura, Ryūji, and also Taiga, but it seemed like Kitamura wasn't going to be doing anything more than necessary, so Ryūji didn't feel he had to waste his time going around telling everyone about Ami's dual personality. After all, he didn't want to get mixed up in things any further than he was already.

Then Taiga,

"…Go get me something to drink."

Looking angry and displeased, a trespasser was occupying the seat opposite Ryūji.

Partway into the lunch break, she had come to return the emptied bentou box, but it seems she intended to take the opportunity and make him fetch her a drink.

"…Um, you know, haven't I been constantly telling you to wash the bentou box before giving it back?"

"Haven't I kept telling you that the school sponges are old and disgusting?"

"And I told you that I keep some new sponges in my locker, didn't I?"

"And I told you that it's too troublesome, didn't I?... Wait wait, it seems like something is bothering you."

He suddenly gave Taiga a sharp look,

"That reminds me…Just why did you say those weird things to Kushieda?"

But he still handed over the bottle of tea that he had brought from home to Taiga. She unscrewed the cap and poured some tea into it, using it as a makeshift cup.

"You're the one doing weird things. Anyway, I didn't even say anything. I wrote it…Hey, where did you drink from?"

"…Umm, about on that mark."

"Even if it's an accident, I really don't want to drink from the same spot."

She squinted suspiciously at Ryūji, then,

"…Namusan!"

Horribly exaggerating, she shut her eyes and brought the makeshift cup to her lips. If it was that detestable, she could have just wiped it, but it seemed like instead of doing something like that, she would rather complain or just get angry. Anyway, they were already close enough that they shared food from the same plate. They had probably already exchanged saliva some time before--- But if he actually said that to her now, he'd probably be killed in less than three seconds.

"Well then…what were we talking about again? Oh yeah, didn't you go off with Ami Kawashima somewhere ?"

"Are you bringing that up again? You're so persistent."

"Well, you didn't answer me!"

With an unusually agitated expression, Taiga cried out .

"Awawawa…"

She had ended up spilling some tea from the cup in her hand onto the desk.

"Ryūji, tissue!"

"Geez, what are you doing, seriously…"

Wiping the desk incredulously, Ryūji gave a long sigh. First he took care of the area that had gotten wet, then he finished by giving the whole thing a final rundown. After all, tea could be used as a cleaning agent.

He was already used to being with Taiga, who was usually clumsy like this. However---he still didn't want

to get involved with her quarrel with Ami. He didn't like her being irritated like this, but he had already colluded intricately with Ami during the recent passing period.

"…Taiga, what was it that you were saying yesterday when we were preparing dinner?"

"Eh?...The maguro tuna, cut it rea~lly thin, I said…"

"That's not what I meant. About Kawashima. You said you wouldn't waste your time getting involved with her, but you'd be able to forgive her once you were mature enough."

"Ah…I didn't say that…No, wait, I lied, I did say that."

"I really think what you were saying is right. It's fine if you don't make friends with her. Just forget about what happened yesterday and never go near her again. You can just keep living normally. Just because you ended up seeing her again doesn't mean you have to become irritated again, does it? It's not like she's done anything to you…at least not today."

"…Yeah…That's right, but…Yes, that is right…"

Quietly moaning before falling silent, Taiga's sharp look started to soften albeit only very slightly. Maybe things would be okay like this. Even if she is the commanding Palmtop Tiger, it doesn't mean she should just go do whatever she wants and hate other people. If she can live with a gentler heart, then there shouldn't be any more of these incidents.

"Well then, let's go wash our bentou boxes."

"…Huh? No way."

"Don't say something so ridiculous; don't you realize what will happen at this temperature? Are you going to be able to use that bentou box again with the rotting rice still inside it? Isn't that disgusting? I know it is to me. So I'm going to wash mine right now. I don't know about yours though."

"What's with that? Couldn't you just wash mine for me at the same time then?"

"This isn't a matter of labor, it's a matter of consideration and common sense. Since I made your lunch for you, you should wash the box before returning it. When the temperature is this high in spring and

summer, you should clean out your bentou box. A word of warning about mold infestations, being unprepared for decay-causing microbes is the worst possible mistake! ...The only microbes that I love in this world are ' lactic-acid bacilli', 'bacillus subtilis natto', and 'the necessary bacteria that live in the mouth and intestines'."

He forced the bentou box back into the hands of Taiga, who was frowning with a look of serious disgust, and started prodding her into standing up. And then, just when he had finally been able to ever so slowly separate Taiga at least five centimeters from the chair,

"Takasu-kun! That was fun earlier~!"

…He just wanted to scream, 'Why?!'.

"Y, yeah."

"I hope we can talk easily like that again sometime."

Leaving the group of girls, Ami had walked about halfway to where they were sitting. Facing Ryūji and waving a slender arm, she had an unrestrained beautiful smile plastered over her entire face. The simple uniform fit her well-proportioned limbs almost criminally well, but in Ryūji's mind, she no longer fell into the categories

of ‘cute’ or ‘beautiful’ or anything like that. The fact that she was two-faced outranked any of that.

…Or at least, that should have been the case.

"…Hey, you know…it’s about our secret chat from earlier."

"Y, yes?!"

Ami suddenly got really close. While he wondered what in the world she was thinking, Ami gently bent her slender body over and brought her lips close to Ryūji’s ear. The warmth of her breath tickling his earlobes caused Ryūji’s pores to open all the way. In a sweet voice ,

"…Um, about what we discussed earlier. Really try to forget about it, okay…Please, all right?"

Her whisper flowed out gently even though the nearby Taiga was right before her eyes. Without saying anything to either Ami or Ryūji, Taiga just…stared with a look cold enough to freeze water.

And then Ami pulled away from Ryūji’s ear with a short ‘Ehe’---While her eyes hinted just a little bit of

sadness, she displayed a praiseworthy smile. Then silently turning to Taiga, she gave a look of pitying or sympathetic kindness. Her eyelashes cast a faint shadow on her face, and Ryūji unconsciously stared as if spellbound---

"…I have class work I need to do."

Taiga's voice broke his trance. No good, he got caught again…Or maybe he should say, he was deceived again.

With a bang, the Taiga who had pulled Ryūji back to the real world forcibly jammed the bentou box at his chest before getting up from her seat. At that instant, Ryūji sighed thinking, 'At least another quarrel has been avoided for now'. She should have let it go, but Ami followed after Taiga anyway. As Ami pestered her, saying 'Hey' and other such things, Taiga's hair for just a second literally and truly puffed up like it had exploded.

"How surprising…I can't believe that we ended up in the same class…You know, this is just my impression from up until now, but…Aisaka-san, do you not have any friends other than Takasu-kun?"

"…Shut up you damned brat, do you want me to make you cry again?"

---They clashed for only a moment.

No one---In that moment of confrontation unnoticed by anyone other than Ryūji, Ami and Taiga exchanged glances only for that one moment.

The two quickly looked away from one another and walked off in their respectively opposite directions. It would be fine if this was as far as things would go, but… he tried to ignore the ominous chill of presentiment running down his back.

However, while the two had only now clearly identified each other as rivals, the fuse had already been lit a long time ago.

Chapter 3

Seemingly uneventful, a few days passed in peace.

Though Taiga was as troublesome and touchy as ever, she was currently ignoring Ami completely, and while Ami might have still been frantically putting on her good-girl act in front of her new friends, she didn't seem to be provoking Taiga into a fight or anything. She might go as far as to look in Ryūji's direction with her Chihuahua-like eyes every once in a while, but she didn't do anything more.

Nevertheless, these fellows who shared a mutual dislike were in the same class after all. When they happened to pass by one another or hear the other's voice, things fortunately ended as near misses---however , that didn't mean that they wouldn't stare silently at one another or engage in some sort of battle of wills for a few seconds. But even so, for as long as Ryūji had been watching during the past several days, Ami and Taiga had not exchanged words face to face even a single time.

If they could somehow peacefully get through the year like this…No, he really hoped they could continue like this all the way to graduation. An event that crushed

Ryūji's tiny hope into even smaller pieces occurred around the time when they switched uniforms in the latter half of May.

"Takasu~! You free now?! I've got some really great news!"

It was late afternoon; homeroom was finally over and they had been released from school.

Wearing glinting black-rimmed glasses and playing with the ends of his purposely messy hair, Noto was all happy-go-lucky as he walked over to Ryūji's seat.

"Haruta said he'd introduce us to three of the first-year girls from the track club today! Of course naturally, we're going, right?!"

"…Sorry, I'll have to pass. I've got something to do. Anyway, even if I went, they'd eventually say something like 'That one guy is scary' and that would be the end of it. Wouldn't they just end up running away then?"

"That's not true! You'll be with Haruta and me, so they 'll definitely come with us! Come on, come on, you've gotta come; we'll be meeting at the McDonald's in front of the station!"

Extremely happy, Noto took hold of Ryūji's shoulders while wearing an incredibly elated smile and just started hopping about all idiotically. However, Ryūji quickly shook off Noto's grasp.

"Seriously, I have something I need to do. Just look, try looking right over there."

He was pointing to a spot by the doorway to the classroom. Right there,

"…Gwa, it's the Palmtop Tiger. So, scary…"

Crossing her arms in an aggressive stance and unintentionally scaring the crap out of the guys who were trying to walk past her, Taiga was staring at Ryūji intently. The crease in her brow issued a silent command ---Hurry up and get over here.

"It was a request from her. So that's why, I have to pass on today, sorry."

"Ehh, what's with that…How boring. I guess there's no helping it, maybe we'll just have to do it 3-on-2. If it's the Palmtop Tiger, there's not really anything I can say to her."

Giving up, Noto turned away from him, but,

"…The thing is, Takasu."

Turning around again all of a sudden, he started muttering in an unusually pensive tone.

"The Palmtop Tiger is fine and all…Well, she is incredibly pretty, and there are even times when I see you two together and honestly think, 'Isn't that nice~'. But, I think you can't be truly happy like that, you know? She's the kind of wild person who piles up desks and chairs before flinging them all over the classroom."

With the comment about the desks and chairs, he was likely referring to last month when Taiga went ballistic telling everyone that they weren't dating.

"…Just why do I need to be happy with Taiga anyway ? We've already said from the start that we're not like that."

"Well okay then, if you say so. But, let me give you a bit of advice. Shouldn't you try properly going out with a different and more normally cute girl at least once? I'm

not saying you should try asking out a top-quality girl like Kawashima-chan or anything, but at the very least try a girl who's not a tiger."

"If I could possibly do that at all, then I wouldn't have any problems, you know."

"Well yeah, but anyway I'm just saying 'try to look for someone else'. If things keep going like this, won't you be unable to have a romantic relationship with anyone because you'll be taking care of the Palmtop Tiger your whole life? Well anyway, see you tomorrow!"

Noto just said whatever he wanted to say before leaving the classroom with a light-footed gait that matched his mood. Considering Noto's words of 'a different, more normally cute girl', Ryūji immediately couldn't help but think of Kushieda Minori.

Or rather, he thought it was rude---Of course he wasn't going to be watching over Taiga for his whole life. When the time was right, he intended to get a girl, preferably Minori, and properly live happily ever after.

“Hey Ryūji! I told you to come right away; does the term ‘right away’ mean nothing to you?! Or what, are you adjusting yourself to a milder pace?! What a Lohasian scheme! Haa…Lohas! Ha!”

“…Yeah, yeah, yeah…”

While Ryūji shrugged his shoulders at her stompish yelling, he obediently sped up as per Taiga’s orders. Then, being just about dragged into the hallway,

"Just look at that! This is just the worst, what am I supposed to do?!"

“T, this is…!”

Just looking at where Taiga was pointing made his blood run cold. It was horrible…

The students’ lockers were all lined up side by side in the hallway, but all the way on the left, Taiga’s locker was left open and sweet strawberry milk had been splashed around messily inside; her jersey, textbooks, and even her dictionary were currently covered in the light pink, milky fluid.

The culprit was Ami…he was so sure of it, but,

"How did this happen, I can't believe it!"

"It wasn't on purpose! I couldn't help it!"

…She had done it herself, this girl who was the clumsiest fellow in all of history.

As Taiga was trying to get ready to go home, she had been facing her locker while drinking strawberry milk. She had opened her locker and was going to leave behind any books she didn't need before going home--- But she had fallen over. Her strawberry milk had gotten away from her and landed in her locker.

"This is…a bit more work than I thought it would be…!"

He muttered quietly, but at the same time, Ryūji's eyes had started shining with a dangerous look. The thrill of excitement running down his back was almost a fever akin to lust.

First, he'd need to get everything out…Take home the jersey and wash it…For the books, he had to thoroughly wipe them down and dry them, or else it would leave

behind a smell…Then, he would take care of the locker's entire interior thoroughly…very thoroughly!

"Can you get it clean I wonder? This."

"…Ah…it will be…I'll definitely get it clean…"

Snugly pulling on the rubber gloves he always kept in reserve, Ryūji felt the blood rushing passionately in his young face. To some measure, there was something about this he ultimately enjoyed---the actual cleaning, the totality of it, or maybe the thoroughness. A mess that at a glance looked ruined beyond all hope of recovery, to bring it back with his own two hands made him feel alive more than anything else in the world. The proof of that was Taiga's island kitchen. The first time he encountered it, it had been totally engulfed in mold and the clogged sink drain had been giving off a sickly sweet stench, but now it was so perfectly cleaned that one could safely go ahead and eat off it. He had given up some of his time to wipe it down and perfectly organize everything in and around the simple modern-styled kitchen, so Ryūji wasn't opposed to bragging that a more blessedly spotless kitchen would be hard to find.

'So now it's your turn'…Ryūji feverishly scanned Taiga's locker with a dangerously excited look in his eyes . However, this time he wasn't filled with just an urge to clean.

"Taiga…It's a promise, right? That you'll give it to me in exchange for doing this."

"I get it already, all right."

Ryūji had ended up committing a seriously egregious act---Or so he might say, but it had been Taiga, asking him to clean for her, who had made the exceptionally clear promise. The large, unopened Hermes bag that Ryūji had kept his eye on for some time…Taiga had promised that she would give the bag that held two of the thick brand-name bath towels to him as compensation for his services.

"Ooh, my long-awaited Hermes towels…Even if you might say I'm just following a fad or something, as long as I can get those orange Hermes towels into my towel closet, then I don't care what you might say about me! From the moment I saw it in an interior decorating magazine, I've been longing for some…Seriously…"

"D, do as you like…"

"I'm just saying this in advance, but I've also had my eye on those linen towels you have that are made from Egyptian cotton. I'm pretty sure you have a bunch of unused ones. I saw them the other day when I was organizing your closet…The next time something else happens, you can give me some of those."

"Is that so…I'm going to go wait in the classroom."

As if she couldn't stand the sight of Ryūji acting like an ecstatic housewife, Taiga eerily gave him a single cold glance, flipped her long hair, and ended up going inside the classroom.

Now that she had left, this was Ryūji's domain. As his eyes glared animalistically, Ryūji was about to start working, but wait, he needed an apron, so he turned first to his own locker. Humming to himself, he pulled out his reserve apron from the locker he always kept clean, and started to put it on somewhat excitedly---Then he thought to himself.

He was passing on a meeting with freshman girls in order to do this kind of work.

That was. That was just…

"…Well…it's normal for me…to skip isn't it…"

Trying to more fully convince himself, he gave a large nod. Because he loved cleaning after all. Because he loved organizing, so much so that it even amazed himself .

It wasn't that he was throwing away a chance at a relationship to take care of Taiga, it definitely wasn't. He was just taking the time to clean something that Taiga had gotten dirty. Taiga really made some almost unbelievable mistakes, so he was just cleaning up after her. He was by her side regularly, so understandably he just wanted to follow her. So, there was a difference.

--- 'If things keep going like this, won't you be unable to have a romantic relationship with anyone because you 'll be taking care of the Palmtop Tiger your whole life?'

There was a subtle but important misconception to what Noto had said. It wasn't true, not with that kind of connotation; he wanted to stay by Taiga's side continuously into the future because he wanted to keep a watchful eye out for chances to clean. That's the only thing he was thinking. Because if he followed Taiga, as

surely as she'd breathe, that girl would mess up and inevitably make something dirty.

'Haa, haa', while Ryūji was taking out Taiga's things, he breathed heavily just like an addict in critical withdrawal as he kept trying to convince himself. He certainly had some sort of addiction, but it's possible that he wasn't even aware of it himself.

One hour eventually had passed since he started cleaning---No wait, it was probably a bit more. It might have looked odd that his head was thrust into someone else's locker as he started seriously, but the guys who might have given Ryūji some weird looks had been gone for some time; the hallway had fallen completely silent, and Taiga might have been the only one left within the classroom.

"Just a little bit more and it'll be perfect…"

That bit of monologue that escaped from his lips echoed in the cramped space.

The cleaning had already reached its peak, and while fully immersed in the locker, Ryūji couldn't help himself from going over the little details like the corners with a cotton swab in hand. It didn't look like any strawberry milk had made it that far, but dirty things were dirty things.

Then he heard the small sounds of someone walking down the corridor. It seemed like a girl. If she saw him like that when the school was devoid of life, he would almost definitely end up startling her. Letting himself be carried away by his groundless notions, Ryūji hid himself completely from her sight with the nearly closed door of the locker and held his breath. However, he almost felt like crying out unthinkingly when looking through the gap in the locker, he saw the person passing by just a few centimeters in front of him.

Those unmistakable good looks couldn't possibly belong to anyone other than Ami Kawashima. And yet, without realizing that Ryūji was there, Ami was entering the classroom where no one but Taiga still remained.

He had a terrible presentiment. A really bad one.

The weird guy who had been hiding in a locker quietly sneaked out into the hallway and, debating whether or not he should go into the classroom, decided to try peering in from the window for the time being.

"Ahh no way…Why are you still here? You're a real eyesore~."

…It looked like his presentiment had been right on the mark. Ami was mockingly slurring her speech. Turning to Taiga, who was wiping one of her textbooks, Ami looked at her with contempt. Ami's lips were twisted into a sneer. It had been a while, but Ami Kawashima-san (the real one) had appeared once again.

Still sitting in her seat, Taiga narrowed her eyes,

"Don't get any closer, you damned brat."

With a level voice that bore no emotion, Taiga disregarded what Ami had said.

Ami broke her glance momentarily as she was taken aback in surprise, but it was only for a moment. Expelling a 'Hmph' and turning away from Taiga, Little Miss Two-Face started speaking.

"Kya~, how scary~! That's just like Aisaka-san! That must be why even the teachers think you're annoying! Even though I was in the staff room asking questions about class just now, all the teachers were making such a big fuss, like 'Ami-chan is oh so cute' or 'I'm so glad you came to our school' or 'You're not being bullied by Aisaka, are you', you know! And everyone just smiled and laughed~! But I was a little annoyed~! They just kept saying 'Ami-chan is so cute', but even if they didn't say that, I'm already fully aware of that!"

"…Ehh?"

With a bemused smile on her rosy lips, Taiga was nearly laughing at Ami's words.

"That's just no good. If you're like that, then just how long will I have to endure your disgusting two-sided personality; at the very least, let me have fun watching

you. Ahh, even when I switch classes, even when I graduate, will it ever end? This who~le time, I've been closely observing you."

"…Wha?"

"Oh I look forward to it, to when you bare your faults. I'll say this ahead of time, but revealing your true nature or whatever, that would be 'simple'. But that would just be boring, so I'm not going to do anything. I'll be watching you for a while, so let me enjoy it for a long, long time. Just…You should probably watch that mouth of yours. Life is long after all…Only if you want to continue living it."

For an instant Taiga's subtle voice tinged the atmosphere of the classroom black, like some sort of sing-song curse. However, Ryūji understood the situation. Taiga wasn't being seriously angry yet. Like a cat playing with a trapped rat, she was just toying with this fellow she couldn't stand and simply enjoying herself…Because both her eyes remained calm and she was even holding back her full strength. If the tiger was actually angry, that kind of thing wouldn't be possible.

She wouldn't stop her flurry of attacks until her prey had been completely ripped to shreds by her every tooth and nail.

But, Ami couldn't have any idea that Taiga was pulling back.

"You…stalker!"

She had probably been overly disgusted by what Taiga was saying. Ami's face visibly twisted with negativity as she yelled that one word. A momentary tension filled the air in that classroom where a devious battle was developing.

"…Haha! Really, you're such an irritating shortie, aren't you?"

Flipping her hair, Ami regrouped and went back on the offensive with a smile.

"Isn't it because you're like that that you have no friends? Despised and all alone, how, very, sad~. Though if Ami-chan had known we were going to be classmates, she probably would have chatted with you using the super cute good-girl version, you know? How regrettable, that you weren't able to become friends with the

popular Ami-chan~…Huhu, doesn't it seem like that Ryūji Takasu is completely smitten with Ami-chan? That guy, he's always looking at Ami-chan with a glint in his eye. It's really annoying, so won't you tell him to stop it already?"

---With that kind of thing being said, it was just about impossible for him to enter the classroom or anything like that. Rather than that, what did she mean by 'glint in his eye'…That was just his normally bad expression. It was hereditary, that's all.

"I'm so glad you made such a mistake…Hey, could you hurry up and go home for me? Looking at your weird face is making me want to vomit."

"I was planning on leaving even if you didn't say anything, because after all unlike a shitty midget like you , the popular Ami-chan has things to do…The thing is…I guess maybe Ami-chan feels sorry for you? Even Yūsaku, the most kind-hearted person Ami-chan knows, dislikes you."

"…What did you say?"

Taiga's tone dropped even lower. Her large eyes that were directed at Ami gave off a blood-red glow. Without realizing, Ami---She had stepped on a landmine.

"That is, I was thinking about it after the first time we met, but you know Yūsaku, he had never mentioned even a word about you, like that you were classmates or anything…Even if I asked him 'Who's that girl?' he didn' t really say anything, so it seems like he doesn't think much of you at all…Or to put it more plainly, Ami-chan's enemy is Yūsaku's enemy. I went ahead and told him everything you did to me at the family restaurant, so I think he probably already hates you a lot. If you're hated by even the totally charitable Yūsaku, then it's all over for you."

She spewed all that out.

Then,

"Well, see you tomorrow!"

She took her bag and smiled! Putting such an expression on her pretty face, there was no hint of her maliciousness. Just like that, she walked right out while humming merrily to herself.

"U, uwawa…~"

Ryūji broke into a dash. He slipped into the locker in the nick of time.

It probably would have been fine if he hadn't hidden at all, but---He couldn't keep himself from hiding. Waiting until the last of Ami's footsteps had faded away, he then took a cautious step into the hallway,

"Ta,…Tai, ga?"

He checked on Taiga through the window.

Still there Taiga had her back to Ryūji, and she very slowly tilted her head. It looked as though she was contemplating the meaning of the words Ami had thrown at her.

'He dislikes you'.

'It seems like he doesn't think much of you at all'.

'Ami-chan's enemy is Yūsaku's enemy'.

'I think he probably already hates you a lot'.

'It's all over for you'.

"U, u, u, u…"

She looked up to the sky.

She screamed with a forced voice.

"…That. Damned. Brat…!"

"Hey, Taiga! Calm down!"

At his desperate cry, Taiga jumped up and turned around. As soon as she noticed Ryūji over the windowsill , Taiga gave a sudden leap forward and grabbed his gakuran sleeve at point-blank range.

"Ryūji~!"

"Hey!"

Taiga's eyes right then were unfocused, pretty much just swirling round and round.

"Ryūji, Ryūji, Ryūji, Ryūji~! Were you listening?! Hey, just now, did you hear that?! Did you?! Did you?! What did you think, about this, and that, and everything she said…Hey, is it true?! Really?! I'm despised?!"

"C, calm down a bit! There's no way it's true, just think about it rationally!"

"Yeah, but that brat, s, she, about me, Ki, Ki, Kiki, Kita, hates…Kiiiii~!" **(!)**

"…U, wah…"

---He just wanted to collapse. Taiga had ended up snapping for real. Violently kicking over three nearby chairs in a row, Taiga was even baring her fangs as she looked up to the sky and gave a low roar.

"Grrr, you damned braaaat! Right now, haaa…I'm going to kill her!!

"Calm down! Don't be hasty, come on, just take a deep breath."

"Shut up!

"Hey!"

She yelled curtly and pushed Ryūji away with a master's authority before breaking into a full-out run. She probably intended to chase after Ami who had left and gone outside. This was bad, if things kept up like this, someone might end up dead.

In trying to stop Taiga, who was headed to the door, Ryūji was also running to the same door from outside the classroom,

"Stop it, don't go! Calm do…"

"---!"

Bang! It was a horrible sound.

Ryūji was opening the door as Taiga was trying to open the same door. They had each pulled at the sliding door in opposite directions on their respective sides. So Taiga, moving at full speed, had crashed her forehead straight into the door that Ryūji had slid across to her side. It was such a surprise that after confirming what happened, Ryūji was left speechless. Taiga was staggering like a drunken cat…two steps, three steps she took backwards.

"…Ow…it…hurts…"

"Taiga~!"

He just about screamed.

As she was slowly on the verge of falling onto her back , he caught her in the nick of time just before she fell.

"S, s, sorry! Are you okay?!"

"Fine…I'm fine…It's okay…I'm, all, ri…"

This looked really bad. It looked like Taiga didn't even have the strength left to belittle him.

* * *

"Ryū-chan, Taiga's room, the lights are off and the curtains are still closed."

While she curled her hair with an iron, Yasuko walked barefoot into the kitchen. Ryūji shrugged as he finished cooking the last of their tonkatsu.

"Seriously?...Even though it tastes best freshly fried."

"Ooh, looks so good~…Ya-chan really loves tonkatsu."

With similar timing, the mother and son both stared at three servings of tonkatsu that were making a delicious sizzling sound. Though their faces didn't really match, their thoughts were exactly the same---If they didn't eat quickly, their food would end up becoming cold.

Since that incident after school, Taiga had seemed rather strange. It looked like she had hit her head pretty hard, but without showing any worrisome symptoms

like nausea or bleeding, she had returned to her usual self soon enough. ‘You, just where were you looking?’. ‘ Were you trying to kill me, you mutt?', she had gone back to saying things like that.

However, while her displeasure was the same as usual , there were times she seemed just a bit ‘gloomy’. After the incident, the Taiga who was usually like a spontaneous firework was more like a piece of fruit rotting from within by her own poison. Immediately after she said her few words of complaint, she had fallen completely silent and didn’t open her mouth again even once on the way back to her apartment. She didn’t even mention anything about Ami.

It wasn’t the same as being ignored. Rather than consciously ignoring Ryūji, it might have been that she was stuck in thought, or perhaps a better way to put it was that she was being despondent in replying because she was deep in thought.

And then, even though it had become habitual for Taiga to come over at 6:30pm to eat dinner, she still hadn ’t shown up at the Takasu residence.

Folding his arms while holding chopsticks in one hand , Ryūji looked over the tonkatsu and muttered.

"Could her health have possibly deteriorated? Then maybe she went to the hospital…alone? If it's like that, then even if I had to force her maybe I should have taken her to the hospital as soon as we got back…maybe this wasn't really the best time to be frying tonkatsu."

"Iya~, I bet she's in there. I can sort of feel her presence through the window, you know."

Yasuko made her declaration as she looked into a mirror while holding a one-piece in front of her chest.

"Ya-chan is pretty sensitive to the presence of women, after all. Inko-chan thinks so too right!"

'Eh…? Ahh, yeah', looking confused and a little stupid , the bird that was suddenly pulled into the conversation oddly enough made a suspiciously human-like response that could have been mistaken for an actual reply.

Inko might somehow be right in this case, as Yasuko's intuition really was quite often accurate. In her own words, it was just that she was a 'mini esper'.

"Ryū-chan, if you're worried, then go ahead and bring her over here~."

As she was saying that, Yasuko had decided on her outfit and hung it to the side, and she was now doing her hair with her left hand and skilfully typing an email with her right. Yasuko wasn't really the type to multitask, but she was usually in a hurry around this time and would noisily send work-related emails as she was getting dressed.

No choice, Ryūji just nodded at the tonkatsu. While he couldn't continue worrying like this, he couldn't just keep Yasuko waiting since she needed to go to work soon.

"Well then, I'll be going for a bit. Go ahead and eat it when it's done, okay?"

"Uwa~o."

Averting his gaze from his real mother who was making a strange sexy pose as part of her reply, Ryūji went out the entrance hall while wearing a T-shirt.

His sandals clanged as he descended the iron stairway; it was already evening in early summer. In the sky there was a beautiful struggle for dominance going on between indigo and crimson, while the wind gently and peacefully blew by.

Ryūji took a great, deep breath, as if to remove the stain of his house's odorous frying oil from his chest. With a good supply of oxygen to his head, even his excessive worries became distinct.

He wondered since they were in the same class, just how in the world did Taiga and Ami plan to get through each day. Having such treacherous quarrels in the cramped classroom, if they were going to slowly whittle away at each other's hit points until one of them collapsed---was there any point in that? Ryūji couldn't understand the world of the aggressive at all.

It was after nearly a minute of walking when he entered the familiar marble entranceway of the bourgeois apartment, but Ryūji hadn't dealt with his worry at all. He could see just by looking at the two girls that they

weren't going to be on good terms with each other, but he also knew that they were going too far. Even so, he was thinking. Couldn't they just maybe respect each other even a little bit so they could have more peaceful lives, rather than rueing the fact they had become classmates.

Images came to mind of the <most unfortunate> Taiga glaring upwards with a visibly intense desire for murder and the <fickle> Ami sharply averting her gaze before putting on a faint smile. If Taiga was the Palmtop Tiger, then Ami would probably be a purebred Chihuahua that only acted amiably to its master. She might yelp and act aggressively, but when it became dangerous, she would leap into her master's (Kitamura's) arms and resort to making faces instead. She was even dressed up in designer clothes.

"…It's too perfect."

He just imagined a tiger and a Chihuahua staring one another down, then feeling completely exhausted, he rang the bell for the auto-locking gate. When no one answered after a while of waiting, he rang it once more then a third time as he nodded to himself. Perhaps a bit of a mother-con, he was convinced that Yasuko's

intuition wasn't off, so he rang the bell yet once more. Then,

"…Who's there?"

With a tense curtness that seemed to be asking 'Who the hell are you?!', Taiga's voice resounded gloomily.

"I…It's me. I've prepared dinner, so get down here and come on over. It's tonkatsu."

"…Don't need it."

Ryūji's normally sharp expression looked like it was tinged with just a little bit of insanity---It wasn't an indication of anger but of surprise. Taiga, who could be counted on to have an insatiable appetite, was saying she wasn't going to eat dinner. This just might be more serious than he had thought.

"Hey, what's wrong with you? Could it be that you're not feeling well? Does your head hurt?"

"…Shut up. It's not that I'm hurt anywhere."

"If you skip dinner, you're going to collapse again."

Taiga's small body had horrible energy efficiency, so if she skipped a meal, she would immediately shrivel and become anemic. Ryūji knew that's what would happen, so that's why he took a sharply terse tone.

"Anyway, open up, I'm not going to stop feeding someone who won't properly explain why they're not going to eat."

Before long, an almost silently faint click of the tongue. Soon after, the auto-locking door opened.

"…Oh."

He was on the second floor of the first-class apartment.

Ryūji had unthinkingly yelled out in surprise at the face that appeared from beyond the oak door being slowly pulled open.

"W, what happened…?"

"…"

The silent Taiga was wearing a blanket over her head, and her cotton lace one-piece was a mess. Her hair was also all tangled and stuck to her face as if trying to hide it , and the one eye that showed through was all red, completely blood-shot---Her face even looked damp throughout, so it was pretty evident that she had been crying alone.

Taiga was a girl prone to crying, but even so this was …

"H, hey. Wait up."

Dragging her blanket behind her, Taiga ended up moving down the elegantly designed beige hallway towards the living room. A little bit hesitant, Ryūji nevertheless took off his shoes and chased after her.

Past the massive glass door, the magnificent living room that was more expansive than twenty tatami mats was wonderfully decorated like something straight out of a foreign magazine, but,

"…Aah…"

Ryūji mumbled and scratched his head.

On the carpet apart from the sofa, crumpled sheets and blankets that looked like they had been taken from the bedroom were piled up, and in the center of it all, there was a large depression just the size of Taiga. She fit in perfectly, squatting in the hole and completing the round pile. As if using the blanket she wore from her head as a lid, Taiga hid her whole body and turned into a complete Hikikomori Tiger.

The crystal chandelier wasn't turned on at the time, and only the recessed lights were casting a gentle illumination from the ceiling. She had probably been exactly like this just moments earlier, sitting in this gloomy room without even being able to tell what color the sky was through her closed curtains.

"…Hey."

"…"

She had been balled up just like this, seriously depressed.

He hesitated for a moment. Still, Ryūji focused his resolve, pulled away part of her cover, and bent down to sit next to Taiga, who was like a baby bird trying to hide in its nest.

"Come on, what's wrong?...Could it be that the spot you banged earlier is hurting? Want to go to the hospital?"

Anyway, though it might have been coincidental, the one who injured her was Ryūji. Even if she might think he was being annoying, he couldn't keep himself from speaking. However, Taiga just balled up like a baby tiger without replying and pressed her face into the sheets.

"…Are you okay…really…?"

A little bit later, she finally said something with a voice like the buzzing of a mosquito.

"…Hey…"

"Hm?"

"…Kitamura, could he actually…really hate me now?"

Turning her hidden face just a little to the side, her eyes, that were wet with tears and peering out from gaps in her hair, looked just a little desperate. Taiga was staring at Ryūji intently.

---He gave a long, long sigh.

"Hey, come on…Are you still worrying about that kind of thing?"

"But-"

"I told you already, right? Kitamura, he saw everything that happened at the family restaurant. He understands you were provoked and that's why you did that kind of thing, and in the first place, he already knows about Kawashima's real personality. And anyway , Kitamura isn't the kind of guy to hate people because of something like this; you should know that more than anyone else, right? You really shouldn't be so depressed over such a trivial thing."

"…Is that, really true…?"

"I'm telling you it is."

"…Well then…Just why am I such a shortie?"

"Eh?"

That question really caught him off guard, as he didn't really spend any time thinking about why people are what they are. A few seconds later he tried to spit out a few words,

"T, that is…I guess it's hereditary, isn't it…"

He was able to make a passable, relatively safe attempt . However, Taiga in a low voice continued speaking along the same vein,

"…I'm a shortie, and my name is even weird…and I can't do anything on my own…"

Right there she ended up falling silent.

It was something he was hearing for the first time. That she wanted to do something about her name 'Taiga' , which was a little over the top considering she's a girl, and her short stature, which was even the reason she was called 'Palmtop'. Now that she had mentioned it, it was

certainly true that Taiga would greedily consume dairy products all the time.

"I had no idea…So you were worried over that kind of ridiculous thing."

"…It's not ridiculous. Unlike you, I'm more sensitive."

Rubbing her eyes with her small fists, Taiga finally lifted herself up and sat down next to Ryūji. He couldn't see it earlier because it had been hidden by her hair, but there was a cooling pad stuck to her round forehead. Maybe it had even ended up swelling. Feeling a pricklish pain in his heart, Ryūji almost unconsciously started gently stroking part of the cooling pad with the tip of his finger. Taiga just let him do it,

"…What's that…I'm 165 centimeters tall, so…"

Her lips showed some displeasure as she mumbled that, and she hung her head a little. 'I'm only just a little taller', he thought, but then Ryūji realized. She wasn't talking about herself here---

"…And my name, it somehow feels like something from Mercury, so…so, so…"

These were things that Ami Kawashima said.

With her stylishly proportionate eight headed figure and her name that seemed cute like an anime character's. Taiga's ideal woman who had all the things she wanted, that would be Ami Kawashima.

'Now I get it', Ryūji breathed. Taiga had fallen into depression like this because in addition to worrying about what Kitamura thought about her, she was also feeling an inferiority complex caused by Ami. The fickle woman she despised had all the things she ever wanted. On that point, there was just no way she could win...If it was like that, just about anyone would want to crouch in a dark room and gloomily shut themselves in, probably.

It's not like Ryūji couldn't understand the kind of state she was in. He nodded a few times seriously,

"And more than that, she's an old friend of Kitamura. Even their families are on good terms."

"Auh…"

---He had meant to show his support, like 'I understand what you mean', and yet. In some way resembling melting ice, Taiga's face ended up twisting pitifully.

…Crap. I ended up hitting the largest complex…

If it was just that Ami had the proportions and her name was cute, Taiga wouldn't have gotten so depressed , but in addition to all that, Ami was on close terms with Kitamura. That most important point, it was because Ami had that advantage in what was the most serious concern for Taiga that she was getting this depressed. She was just futilely chasing after the things that Ami had and she didn't.

Ryūji finally realized his mistake, but it was all ready too late. Looking like the contents of a confused jack-in-the-box, Taiga shuffled back to her hikikomori corner. Finally, she completely closed herself in with her blanket,

"…I wonder why you're so insensitive like this…I'm just amazed at your thick-headedness…"

Her low mumble resounded with bitterness. With her saying that kind of thing, he couldn't keep himself from retorting,

"Well, I'm always dumbstruck with the way you live your life."

"What?!"

At his accidentally rude comment, Taiga quickly became livid. She flung aside her blanket and stood up.

"W, well aren't you energetic?"

"Tell me, just, what, part, of me, is, so, surprising!"

"Well, like that! Right now! Wait a! Oh! Auh!"

Interrupting him, she started hitting upside the face with a cushion,

"You! You're a! Dog! Mutt!"

"Dust! It's flying everywhere! Stop it! Pah!"

"Quiet! Shut up! Ha…choo!"

"Ah! Oh!...Uwa, your nose is running!"

More than the physical impact was the emotional degradation…It was enough to keep him from even resisting, but then…Taiga's stomach rumbled with a sound similar to an earthquake.

"Huh?"

Widening her blank-looking eyes and halting her attack, Taiga looked down at her own stomach that was making such a tremendous sound with a surprised face.

"I wonder what that sound was just now."

"Don't go 'Huh'! That sound's coming from your stomach!...Geez, I knew it, you're hungry, aren't you? Come on, let's go eat tonkatsu."

"…I told you I don't need it didn't I?"

"I believe your stomach more than your words. It's almost time for Yasuko to leave, so come on, get up."

"…The meat, is it black pork?"

"It's black pork."

"…The fatty parts, can I eat them?"

"Ah, yeah."

Looking a little reluctant, Taiga finally got up from her nest of blankets. First he made her blow her nose, then check to make sure the doors were secure and she had her key, and had her put on sandals over her bare feet; like that, Ryūji successfully brought Taiga out from her apartment.

Then they walked beneath the sky that was being overtaken with indigo more than before, and after ascending the stairway of the rented house next door,

"Ryū-chan!"

Yasuko's teary face peered out from the entrance hall doorway. Looking as if she had been waiting earnestly for the two of them until now without eating,

"Even though we're having tonkatsu, we don't have any sauce; this is no good~!"

She held the empty sauce pot in one hand and told her son the shocking news.

With a quick about-face, Ryūji and Taiga dashed off and with a fast pace leapt into the nearest convenience store. Ryūji went all out to the aisle with sauces, while Taiga went on her own to browse magazines.

Having paid for the sauce,

"Come on, we're in a hurry, so let's go."

He hit Taiga in the rear with the convenience store bag . Taiga looked back at him offended,

"I get it, so stop being so noisy and don't touch my butt, you perverted dog. Just give me a sec…Ah."

Flipping through a magazine, her fingers that were turning the pages suddenly stopped. Then as Ryūji was nearly out of the store in front of her, Taiga caught the end of Ryūji's t-shirt and pulled him back.

"Hey, look at this."

She was showing him a page. Turning around and thinking 'What?', Ryūji instinctively stopped walking when he caught sight of the picture being shown.

"…If it isn't Ami Kawashima."

At the bottom of the open magazine there was a small column featuring Ami in casual clothing and the following words.

---Starting with this month's issue, Ami-chan will be taking a break for a while to take care of school-related matters. Look forward to seeing her again!

"That means she's taking a holiday. That's what this is saying."

"So she's taking a break from work because she moved over here?...Our school, is it really all that great…"

Somehow, he felt like it just didn't make much sense, but,

"Pf, this isn't the time to be messing around talking like this. If we don't hurry, Yasuko will be late."

Putting away the magazine, the two of them jogged out of the store, passed through the parking lot and just made it to the street.

"…Hm?"

"…What is it?"

Practically at the same time, they ended up seeing something weird and stopped. They instinctively turned to look at one another.

There was a bizarre and mysterious-looking person passing by closely in front of the two. She had a black full-body jersey on and wore sunglasses, even though it was night, so it was obviously a cover, and then on top of all that, she wore a wide-brimmed hat. Yet, with her long , slender limbs, her exposed, sheen hair, her small face, and her great style, no matter how you looked at it, she could only be the person who was surely the only model in this town---The person they had just seen in the magazine.

Taiga understandably frowned with displeasure,

"What, you ask…It's her…"

"…Speak of the devil…But what's with her appearance?"

With such a bizarre outfit, she just ended up standing out even more. If this were Hiroo or Azabu, then, just maybe, she could have blended into the city with the air of a private performer hiding her identity. However, in this residential district no one would complain about misdeeds, even if she was mistaken as a fashionable convenience store robber and reported.

Ami went into the convenience store dressed like that and naturally picked up a basket, but afterwards, it was remarkable. She took just about all the pastries and ice cream products lined up on the shelves and threw them in her basket with tremendous aggressiveness. That was followed by bentous, side dishes, and even pastry breads . PET bottles of non-diet drinks---sweet carbonated beverages as well. Even the shop clerk was leaning from his register to keep a watchful eye on her strange behavior.

"…What a weirdo…Is she having a house party or something?"

"No…That's not it, not with those things. Fu~n, I see… I ended up seeing something interesting."

With a small laugh, Taiga stood up in front of Ryūji and started walking quickly. It seemed she figured something out on her own, but didn't feel like sharing the information.

"Ryūji, let's run."

"Ah, yeah."

They were in a hurry, after all. Putting aside what just happened for the time being, Taiga and Ryūji took off along the asphalt road towards the Takasu residence where their tonkatsu was waiting.

But at that time, strangely, as if enjoying herself, Taiga's mouth was parted with a smirk.

Chapter 4

If one were looking for the center of the 'stand out group' amongst the girls of class 2-C,

"Ami-chan, I saw the magazine that came out yesterday~!"

That would be Kihara Maya, the girl whose choice to dye her long straight hair over the break was met with fawning admiration from the girls but concealed disapproval from the boys. Then,

"It said that you're putting your modeling on hold for a while, but is that really true?"

She had a small and oddly voluptuous beauty mark near her mouth, and she and Kashii Nanako were a pair of good friends. When the pair of girls who were flashier together as a set started talking with Ami, some more girls gathered around as if being summoned.

"Maya-chan, so you took the time to see this month's issue! Thanks~! That's right, I was able to arrange for some time off work."

Having ascended to the top of the 'stand out group', Ami was dispensing a simply dazzling smile, and the surrounding girls were all abuzz, basically saying 'That's such a waste~!'.

A few guys whose eyes were unintentionally drawn to the scene,

"Somehow, it feels like the girls in our class have gotten cuter overall…Really, when it comes to girls, forget the underclassmen, the girls in our class are the best, aren't they?"

"That's right, once you get to know one another properly, you can start building a relationship. It's the simplest way. Ah~, when I joined this class in April and was wondering just how Takasu and the Palmtop Tiger got together, I got really depressed, but now that I think about it, isn't that the greatest luck…There's still Maya, and even Nanako, and then best of all, there's Ami…If you just look at her face, the Palmtop Tiger is super cute, but…they're all really cute."

Ryūji was stuck between the black-rimmed glasses wearing Hisamitsu Noto and the superficial long-haired Kouji Haruta who were both smiling happily. Pretending

not to hear them and narrowing his eyes, Ryūji was in the middle of reattaching the button that had fallen off from his cuff using a sewing kit. It's good that they were able to think like that---While that's what he was thinking, he was a pacifist who wouldn't actually say it out loud. In any case, Noto and Haruta had told him about yesterday's meeting with the freshman girls and how, after the pair treated the girls to McDonald's and karaoke, it had ended horribly with the girls just saying ' Thank you' and not even giving out their email addresses.

"Ah, it's Maruo. Hey, hey, as Ami's childhood friend, don't you think it's a waste too? About how she's taking a break from modeling, I mean."

Being flagged down by Maya, Kitamura, who was fondly called 'Maruo' amongst the girls, readjusted his glasses and turned to face them.

"Isn't it fine? As long as that's what Ami has frankly decided. She can still go back to modeling once she's graduated from high school."

"Eh~! She's so cute like this, it really feels like a waste! Maruo, you act too business-like to Ami-chan! Don't say things like 'frankly'!"

'That's right, that's right', their shrill voices besieged Kitamura from all sides, but there was an apparent tone of laughter that lacked any actual anger or scorn. According to the girls, Kitamura was absolutely " everyone's adorable prized possession".

"…What an inconspicuously popular guy…I wonder if I should wear glasses, too…"

At Haruta's mutterings, the unpopular glasses-wearing Noto put on a complicated expression.

However, Kitamura just shrugged his shoulders, going 'yeah, yeah' with a bitter smile before he escaped from the group of exceptionally cute girls while acting perplexed.

"Oh, everyone's here."

With a face that made it seem as if he was being rescued, Kitamura came to a halt next to Ryūji and the others.

"Damnit, go back, get out of here! You aristocrat! This here is a crab-canning boat, it's not a place for someone like you!"

"Ha, nice one. Aim for the world." **(!)**

Brushing aside Haruta's harsh words with a laughing smile, Kitamura took a seat facing Ryūji. If the group around Ami was like the sunlight, then the group of four boys was just like the shade.

"But, it's not like it's a real waste you know."

The flashy Ami spoke in remarkably cheery voice that resounded throughout the classroom at break time.

"I've been wanting to enjoy a normal high school life like this. So this is fine. I'm even able to make lots of friends like this. You know, I'm really the happiest right now. That's because everyone is here!"

How is she so good like this~! Ami-chan is just too good!---The girls' excited voices were practically sighs of admiration. Ryūji instinctively glanced over at the side of

Kitamura's face. Even while he and Haruta were continuing to joke around, for just an instant it looked like Kitamura gave an almost imperceptibly small sigh.

"Is that how it is, yeah I guess that makes sense. I guess since models are busy and have to even go on diets and do other troublesome things, an ordinary high school girl wouldn't be able to pull it off at all, right."

Nanako was nodding, and Maya also chimed in with a 'yeah, that's right!' as she opened her already large eyes even wider.

"That's something I've been wanting to ask. Ami-chan, you're really slender. You must have some sort of diet, don't you? Is there a super specialized diet exclusively designed for models? Come on, tell us~, please tell us!"

"Yeah, I want to hear it!"

"Eh? Ami-chan's diet? I want to know too~!"

When the discussion turned to dieting, the group surrounding Ami became all the more excited. However, Ami at first mumbled 'Aw come on', then gave a small laugh and started speaking.

"I don't really diet or anything, so I don't know about that. It seems like I'm naturally predisposed to not getting fat. I eat whatever I want, but as long as I eat healthily, it seems like I'm fine. I really love eating things like pastries, so I think it's actually better for my body if I don't restrain myself or anything."

She spoke with a smile.

But ever so slightly, the corners of her mouth might have twisted mockingly.

"…Predisposed…"

One of them muttered quietly.

"…Hu~n."

"…Is that so."

"…I don't get it."

"…Ehh."

---Ami probably noticed it. That the atmosphere of admiration around her had suddenly dropped in temperature by about three degrees.

That Maya, who had been pushing herself every day for half a year to struggle and persevere with her afternoon diet of only salad and Oolong tea, was wearing a frozen expression.

And that Nanako, who just yesterday had been desperately walking off calories and had even turned down her father's gift of sushi, looked as if her eyelids were twitching.

Even if she reapplied her good-girl façade, she had for some reason ended up allowing a glimpse of her true personality to rise to the surface.---It was obvious that in that instant the girls' eyes had turned cold, so much so that even someone like Ryūji took notice.

"…Unforgivable!"

Bang, the sound of someone standing up and knocking back her chair, the roaring voice filled with anger made the chilled atmosphere tremble.

The vein in her temple had risen in the shape of a cross and her two fists were practically audible with a crackling sound as she walked towards the front of the otherwise silent classroom.

Her name was Kushieda Minori…an energetic girl who, unsatisfied with just her club activities, decided on longer paths both between school and home and on the way to her part-time jobs, and she always traversed them at a fast pace.

"No matter how it looks, I'm a warrior of dieting, you know…"

'That's got to be a lie' Ryūji thought with his head tilted. Just last month she supposedly ate a bucket of pudding by herself…however, it seemed like she was being serious.

"…Taiga. You're here aren't you?"

"Yeah!"

The wild beast who was associated with her as a steadfast friend, Taiga Aisaka made her way forward. *This girl at least, there is just no way she is even close to being on a diet*, Ryūji thought, but if it was for her friend, Taiga was the type of girl who would help out no matter what. Even if she had gone and eaten two servings of tonkatsu.

"Let's go Taiga!"

“Hey, Minorin! Really?”

“Okay Taiga! Really!

The two suddenly outstretched their arms widely, and with a sidestep, started nimbly grappling sumo-style within the ring of girls,

“Eh?! Wait, wh, what?!"

They moved over to Ami, who was sitting in the center . The other girls were going ‘kya, kya’ and fled the area looking oddly indifferent to the situation, leaving nothing to protect Ami. In perfect harmony, Taiga and Minori quickly chased down Ami, who stood up in a vain attempt to escape the linked pair that started spinning around her to prevent her from getting away.

“What the heck you guys!”

“Fuhahaha! Can you break free from our guard, young lady?!”

“Excuse me for being such a shortie! Excuse my weird name!”

“Y, your name?! What are you talking about?!”

When he could see her face, Ami's expression was of confusion and bewilderment, but she didn't seem like she was going to act against the two's unbreakable guard as she just cowered nervously.

Was it okay to not help her? Ryūji checked Kitamura's face, but just muttering 'Ara~' like an old lady, Kitamura made no attempt to stand up.

"This is a case of bullying!"

"The Palmtop Tiger and Kushieda, they're bullying Ami-tan!"

People might have noticed, but no one could do anything about it.

"Ready? Kawashima-kun?"

Minori twisted her lips charmingly into a huge grin. At Ami's back, Taiga grasped and locked up her thin limbs. Then,

"Hey, wait you guys, wh…Ya! Kya~---!"

Ami's shriek resounded. Minori had sprung forward like a striking snake and grabbed firmly with both hands onto Ami's abdomen, which was covered by her blazer.

"…Ho…This is, this is…"

"Ugu…"

When she saw her grin, Ami's expression stiffened in dismay. Then Minori slowly licked her lips once,

"Teacher---! Kawashima-san, she's been hiding flab in her gut!

She turned into a devil. Rubbing the excess flesh she was gripping,

"Hey hey hey hey! It's customary on trips to bring three hundred yen worth of meat at most! Is this three hundred yen worth of excess flab?! Eh?! This flab isn't from eating bananas!" **(!)**

"S, s, st, stop it, stop, nooo~!"

Minori was violently moving both her hands that were thrust under Ami's uniform back and forth. The boys

were blushing as their questionable imaginations were being stimulated.

"Ohhh, you've been gathering up quite a bit, haven't you?! Hmm?!"

"N, noooo, stop it----!"

"What's with that 'predisposed' nonsense! Just what's this then?! Hm?! What's this right here?! Eh?!"

"Nooo, cut it out, kyaaa!"

"Ahahaha! This here is for meatbuns! Ahahahaha! And this is for Haagen Dazs! Take this, 'divine fist of convenience stores~shining Family Market version'! High~ calories!"

"I said~ stop that…Nyaa---!"

Minori's fists seemed to leave a golden trail, and in the end she stretched out from Ami's stomach a bit of quivering flesh, which was certainly present but very minor.

Ami's screams lasted for quite a while, but eventually they dissipated into empty space and vanished.

…A silence took over with everyone left breathless.

Eventually, Taiga released Ami from her restraining hold. Completely sapped of any strength, the fool fell to her knees without saying anything.

Holding her clenched hands to her heart, Minori looked towards the heavens.

"…Scattered like stardust, I dedicate this to the tears of dieting warriors…!"

"U~, u~, u~…!"

Released at last, Ami was clutching at her disheveled clothing with both hands while still pitifully kneeling on the floor. She sadly sat on the ground in a position hiding her small face flushed full red, and seemed to be crying and trembling, making low sobbing sounds.

Looking down at her condition, Minori smiled whole-heartedly in satisfaction.

"…Taiga. Your tattling is always so accurate."

Similarly looking down on Ami, Taiga's lips were also parted in a wide happy smile.

"No no, it was all Minorin. You did such a good job."

And then, slowly making her way over to stand right above Ami, Taiga's eyes glistened with a heartfelt happiness. Her face was rosy with pleasure, and her protruding lips were deep red like an animal that had gorged on blood.

"Kawashima-san. I'll introduce you, this here is my best friend, Minorin. So now you know for sure that I have friends other than Ryūji."

"4649!" (Note: 4=yo/shii, 6=ro, 9=ku, 4649="yoroshiku " which means something like "Nice to met you")

Raising her hand, Minori laughed. Then, standing next to her, Taiga pointed straight at Ami,

"This is---You covert glutton! You, you eat too much!"

Cl~ang!

She said it plain as day, just like that. Ami's shoulders sagged as if she had no willpower left at all. Minori and Taiga were standing shoulder to shoulder going ' Hahahaha!'. Laughing boisterously, they high-fived. ' You're the best', 'No, you're the best'…These two devils started to walk off as they occasionally looked at one another and whispered. Then, taking a final look back,

"…Hey, plan on running a marathon? A black jersey would definitely suit you."

At Taiga's final parting shot, Ami suddenly looked up. It probably occurred to her that she had been spotted shopping at the convenience store. She wiped the tears from the corner of her eyes with her thumb,

"I'll show you running a marathon or whatever! Running around and around and around, you damned midg…"

"Ami-chan, you okay~?"

A short squeak, Ami started biting her lip to hold back a wail. Sm…ile, she tried mending her appearance.

"I, I'm fine…"

She tried to smile at the girls who were lending support. It was a habit for someone skilled at controlling her impression.

"That was so wrong! Ami-chan isn't fat at all~!"

"Ah, that was horrible, those two are so violent~!"

The girls voiced words that at least seemed kind, but everyone seemed to be laughing somewhat happily as well. Similarly trying to laugh as she stood up, it seemed Ami was gritting her teeth as if trying to endure the humiliation. The mask of the smiling angel, as to be expected, seemed to have been shattered and was beginning to disappear.

"…You guys are demons."

He was certainly happy from the bottom of his heart that he could see Minori's refreshing face, but even so, Ryūji couldn't keep himself from muttering. Ami might have in fact been 'rescued', but he still wondered if this was okay…No matter what might have happened, it still felt like they went overboard. Ami had just become so pitiful. However,

"…I see."

For some reason, looking as though he had figured something out on his own, Kitamura was nodding lightly .

"If you act that way, then Ami will become like that."

Ryūji was thinking 'Just what in the world do you mean by 'become like that'?', but the bell signifying the end of recess rang before he could ask his question.

* * *

Night was drawing nearer as the sunlight of the long early summer's day began to recede.

Housewives out shopping, middle school students finished with their club activities heading home with their bikes, children walking their dogs, and students wearing earphones with dangling white cords, shadows intermingled chaotically along the sidewalk lined with Japanese zelkova trees in full-foliage as everybody walked hurriedly amidst the slightly chilly wind.

Having finished shopping at the busy supermarket, Ryūji and Taiga also joined the mass of people and headed to the Takasu residence beneath the darkening indigo sky.

It seemed the events at school had done wonders to relieve her stress,

“Fu~, fu~n.”

Taiga was walking a little in front of Ryūji and, completely different from her broken-down state yesterday, hummed to herself while lightly swinging her head back and forth. It was unusual---However, Ryūji just followed her without saying anything as the shopping bag swung in his hands. If he were to say even a single phrase, like 'how rare' or something, she would probably get angry and stop humming immediately. Her somewhat off humming, it really was quite rare.

He overheard a little girl who was passing by ask of her mother, 'That person, is she a princess?'. Certainly with Taiga's fashion sense, she might have seemed to children like a stereotypical princess straight from a fairy tale. Underneath her pale lime green cardigan was a one-piece dress patterned with small flowers, and the lacy pure white petticoat, distinguishable beneath the partially unbuttoned dress, had numerous layers of frill that airily added a lot of volume and made Taiga's short body look very charming. Her long and somewhat wavy hair was tied with a ribbon, which was unusual, and she even had a beaded purse and dainty white sandals that Ryūji hadn't seen before.

Although she dressed in such fashion everyday, today nevertheless seemed especially extravagant. Really though, it must have been her mood.

When it was time to go home after school, Taiga, with a smile, said something along the lines of, 'I'm going home first, so come get me when you go shopping.', and somehow she even waved farewell to Kitamura who was next to Ryūji---Of course, her face was completely red, both her eyes were resolutely turned upwards, she couldn't get herself to say anything, and her face was horribly stiff, but still. Ryūji saw Taiga give a small leap on the spot after Kitamura acknowledged her with an ' Ou!'.

Even if it was only that, he might as well enjoy Taiga's current happiness.

"Hey Ryūji."

"Hm?"

Suddenly turning his way, Taiga slowed down until she was beside Ryūji and matched his pace. This was also

quite unusual. Walking in front as if she was his master or walking angrily behind him in sullen contempt, those were Taiga's normal positions.

"Are you cooking salmon today?"

The abnormal Taiga inquired with a calm voice, which seriously moved Ryūji…This current state of affairs, it wasn't bad at all.

"Yeah…I'm thinking meuniere style. First adding salt and pepper, then sprinkling it with flour, and then frying it in butter. It should be tasty if we eat it with ketchup."

"That's good! Sounds delicious!"

The calm conversation that sounded just like a discussion between young housewives was suddenly hit by a major earthquake in the next instant.

"Hmm I know, maybe I'll make a salad."

"…"

At the word 'salad', the shopping bag slipped out of Ryūji's hands.

"What?"

Ryūji looked up with his eyes wide; Taiga was scrunching her lips in displeasure. Even so, her anger was only up to about thirty percent from normal.

"…N, nothing…I was just surprised. Just now…I must have been hearing things. Yeah, that must be it."

Brushing off the surprise and picking up the shopping bag, he was going to pretend that nothing had happened, but,

"That's not so! Even I can make a salad at least!"

It's not that easy. Taiga, who doesn't even take her rice bowl to the kitchen after she's done eating, is saying she will make a salad. The same Taiga who nearly starved to death because the bentou shop had closed down. Was he still in the real world…? Nearly at a loss for words, Ryūji started shaking his head back and forth.

"I, it's impossible."

"Why's that? You underestimate me too much."

Fufu, laughing almost haughtily, Taiga puffed up her chest with pride and took on an imposing stance.

“When I was in elementary school, I made one in class. A salad, I mean. I even made the dressing.”

“…Well then, try telling me how you do it.”

“That’s easy. First, you buy the lettuce, right? Then you separate the leaves, don’t you? Then you slice them up, right? Then you put it on a plate, right? Then you serve it with mayonnaise, right?…And with that it’s done .”

“That’s not right.”

Ryūji firmly shook his head.

“It’s not that I hate simplicity, but the first thing to do is wash the lettuce. You run it under cold water don’t you? Just what were you talking about dressing for?”

“Such trivial things…"

"It's not trivial. It's really important, if you don't run the lettuce under cold water to make it crisp, then it'll be all limp when you eat it, won't it?"

"…Sister-in-law."

"Eh?!"

Calling him such an unexpected name, Taiga left behind Ryūji, whose eyes had become sharp and bright, and started walking in front of him at her normal position.

"Ryūji is such a sister-in-law. A sister-in-law who takes over the house, not letting the wife speak or use the kitchen at all. I, the pitiful wife, am forced to do the simple chores of cleaning the toilet, cleaning the bath and chopping wood…"

"Just when did I ever make you clean the toilet or the bath or anything like that at all?! And if you think you can chop wood, then why don't you try it?! More than any of that, just whose wife are you supposed to be?!"

"…"

"Don't ignore me!"

"Dog mother-in-law."

"How the heck do you read that?!"

In the end it was like always, the harsh quarreling would build up futilely and they would eventually reach the last street corner. They finally made it to the rented housing where Taiga's apartment and the Takasu residence were.

However, at that time,

"Finally caught up to you!"

Coming up from behind them, something had suddenly dove right before Ryūji's eyes. Taiga, who was walking in front of him, disappeared from his sight.

"W, what the heck?!"

This fellow was hanging off of Ryūji's arm as if practically jumping at him. Considering how tightly he was being clung to, he felt like his left arm was being grasped with a desperate helplessness.

"I saw you go by just now, so I ran after you! Please… pretend to be my friend!"

"…Uh…Eh?!"

Short of breath and with a hazy expression on her white face, the one pressing her slender body was a descended angel---Or rather, it was Ami Kawashima, the girl generally ranked number one. She wasn't wearing the hat or the sunglasses at least, but she still had that black full body jersey on, and as usual, because she was trying too hard to be inconspicuous, she ended up standing out even more than usual. He wondered if she had maybe listened to what Taiga had said and been actually out running a marathon. However,

"Takasu-kun, please…"

Her pleading voice was overflowing with serious desperation, and even her breathing seemed a little jagged. Ryūji had absolutely no clue what on earth she was asking of him.

"N, umm…W, what?!"

"That guy over there…"

The slender fingers that were gripping Ryūji's arm tightened. Her hand was sweaty, and more than that it seemed to be trembling slightly; it seemed like something was seriously not right. Perplexed, he tried following Ami's line of sight,

"…What's that?"

The street corner just a bit in front of them, the shadow of a lamppost. There was a man standing abnormally still . Without thinking, Ryūji's face also stiffened.

Quite difficult to see from where they were standing, the guy looked relatively slender and carefully dressed, so he looked a bit like a college student on the outside, but if that were the case, he would be carrying more. At first glance, he might not be taken for a 'weird guy', but no matter how one thought about it, it just wasn't normal for someone to stand still, hidden in the shadows, so there was an atmosphere of weirdness about that guy, making him stick out from his surroundings.

Seeming really frightened just from looking at that guy , Ami was trying as hard as she could to use Ryūji's body

as a shield and hide behind him. However, that man didn't seem to really care that they noticed him, since he didn't stop staring at Ami even for a moment.

It was a bit…no, it was probably exceptionally creepy, so Ryūji was starting to step back with Ami in tow when,

"That's right, it's about time…Come on, let's settle this …"

Something even scarier had been on standby behind them. Turning around at the sound of the low curse-like murmur, he saw Taiga, who had more than likely been knocked aside by the leaping Ami and rolled to the edge of the street, as she slowly pulled herself up,

"I told you to run a marathon, but nobody said you could run around in front of my house, you damned brat …I'm going to turn you into a dirty rag."

She held one hand low with her fingers fluttering, the other raised up in the form of a fist, and both her feet were freely shuffling back and forth, left and right. Performing such skilled amateur footwork and calling out for a fight as if saying 'Come', her eyes sparkled hungrily…

"Read the atmosphere. You get it, don't you?"

It was as if a tiger (the pissed off Taiga) was at the front door and a wolf (the weirdo) at the back. They had unexpectedly ended up acting out the Chinese proverb, and having turned himself around a full 180 degrees, Ryūji was forced for the time being to try and calm down a wild animal that had lost all sensibility. Without even really paying attention to Taiga, Ami had been roundaboutly running around trying to avoid eye contact with that weird man until finally,

"Scary…"

She clung to Ryūji's shoulder and firmly pressed her face against him.

For a single moment, Taiga's pretty French doll face shook. Little by little, bit by bit, it kept twisting as if expanding diagonally from top to bottom until at one point---Crack! Ryūji definitely felt like he heard the sound of something snapping. And then,

"…Listen tou mweeee---!" **(!)**

Perhaps overly agitated, she was fanatically tripping over her words. Taiga shouted and with incredible leg

strength that could even knock over a lamppost sent a nearby recycling bin flying with a vigorous kick. The seemingly heavy object made a loud 'bang!'. Spinning through the air, it passed over Ami's and Ryūji's heads making a beeline for that suspicious character and continued for several meters before landing near his feet with a thunderous clang.

"…!"

Understandably taking a few steps back in fright, the man changed directions. He started running seriously and fled.

"Hm?…Who's that guy?!"

Watching his retreating figure, it seemed like even Taiga had finally noticed that there was someone there. Her great wrath disappeared almost instantaneously,

"Suspicious!"

Full of distrust, that uninhibited mutter passed through her lips.

Ami gradually started breathing normally and let go of Ryūji's arm. However, she seemed helplessly unstable on her own two feet,

"Are you okay?"

"Ah, yeah…It's just been a long time since I ran so seriously…Ooh, I'm so exhausted."

She tried to smile jokingly, but compared to her normally perfect smile, right now she looked quite stiff.

"Just what the heck was all that with that guy just now ? Do you know him?"

He asked while lending her a hand, but she just shrugged ambiguously,

"That is…Umm…When I'm trying to shop…I sometimes end up running into him there…Maybe he's an odd fan…They're around sometimes, those kind of guys…"

Looking disturbed, her eyes were swirling around. At her appearance, Ryūji and Taiga instinctively looked at one another. Considering how scared she had been just

before, the fact she was now saying he was a 'fan', it left them uncomfortable and unable to say anything. However, Ami turned to Ryūji and clasped her hands aloft,

"Hey, I have a bit of a favor to ask. It's scary walking home by myself right now. That guy might still be around here somewhere…It's only for a little bit, so will you hide me in your house? Please!"

She said something like that. Rather than the good-girl act she always had on, right now she was honestly showing a real expression.

Ryūji thought for a moment before finally asking her.

"Between this two-story rented house built from wood and the second floor of that first-class apartment built within the past year, which one would you like to be hidden within?"

"That one!"

Replying without even a moment's hesitation, Ami was pointing her finger straight at the apartment

building. Even though Ryūji tentatively glanced at Taiga out of the corner of his eye wondering 'How will she react?',

"That's my apartment…It's fine, come with me. It's probably for the best if you lay low for a while."

"Eh…Yours?!...This isn't a joke, I don't know what you'll do to me."

Ami looked at Taiga, someone with whom she had a horrible relationship, with a staring glance, but,

"Don't be stupid. Don't you understand that this is an emergency situation?"

Taiga was shaking her head back and forth with a serious expression on her face. Then with a strong grip, she firmly took Ami's hand in her own,

"Once something happens, it'll be too late. This will be fine, so stay at my house."

"Wait a second you…A, are you being honest? Are you saying that seriously?"

"I'm just saying this in advance, but that house over there is Ryūji's home. There are quite a few problems concerning the safety over there. Seriously, one time in the dead of night, I sneaked in through the window and nearly beat Ryūji to death…It was easy. Easier than breathing."

Ami looked to Ryūji as if saying 'That can't be',

"It's true."

Ryūji nodded as he said that. Ami took some time to consider,

"…Is this okay?"

Gently raising her large eyes, she quietly asked of Taiga…Really, she gently looked at her.

"Yeah. Of course."

And then somewhat lazily, Taiga nodded without any doubt. Just a little bit moved by it all, Ryūji unthinkingly ended up heartily whispering.

"You…you just might be a good fellow."

"It's just for this situation. It's not like I can't be sympathetic."

Smiling generously, she firmly took hold of the still somewhat hesitant Ami's shoulder. There might have even been a little bit of caring in her forcefulness.

"Kawashima-san, a lot of things have happened between us, but let's call a temporary truce for now. At Ryūji's house, there's his busy mother and an ugly weird parrot. It would be for the best if you chose to come to my house."

Because she was showing such kindness, Ryūji decided he would forgive her for insulting his pet by pretending not to have heard anything. Ami still appeared a bit hesitant, but holding onto her shoulder, Taiga was practically dragging her while making way towards the apartment entrance.

"Ah, Taiga. What should I do about your dinner?"

"Keep it for later will you, I'll eat it over there afterwards…Because I think I'm more alert when my stomach is empty."

Without even giving him a chance to ask about her puzzling words, Taiga and Ami disappeared within the apartment.

After it had gotten really late, Taiga came over to eat dinner at the Takasu residence,

"…I'm stuffed! That was the best!"

Smiling in an unusually happy mood, she had eaten three whole servings of white rice and salmon.

Chapter 5

"…Whoa!"

Ryūji shuddered and instinctively pulled back.

Going to school like usual while keeping some distance between himself and Taiga, he had entered the classroom and gone to his seat. Ami had come over to say 'Thanks for yesterday' and he was looking at her face ,

"…W, what?"

"Nothing…Just that…"

She was illuminated by the bright, early-summer light from the morning sun---Surprisingly dispirited, she looked completely worn out and exhausted. Her voice was even a little raspier; yesterday had really done a number on her.

"…How should I say this…You seem like you're worn out…"

"…Do I really…?"

Looking unlike her usual self and letting out a pitiful sigh, Ami pulled up a nearby chair and sat with her elbows resting on Ryūji's desk. Then gloomily wrinkling her brow,

"That's right, I couldn't shake my exhaustion from yesterday…"

Like that, she ended up pressing her head face down against the desk. It might have been shampoo or maybe soap, or perhaps she was wearing some sort of perfume, but she was giving off a lightly pleasant scent. Just a little stimulated, Ryūji's eyes were glinting animalistically. However, he somehow maintained a calm appearance,

"…Yesterday, you really had a horrible experience. It's understandable that you'd be tired."

He tried saying something like that in a manly way.

"That's not it."

Raising her white face, Ami looked straight at Ryūji with evenly shining eyes.

"At Taiga Aisaka's apartment…Doing one thing or another for five hours…No, more like six hours…"

"D, did Taiga do something?!"

"She kept me dancing. And, she kept me singing."

Dancing?...Singing?

Turning away from Ryūji, who was tilting his head at her really odd answer, Ami let off another sigh…She was staring off into the distance with a sense of ennui.

"…If I didn't listen to what she said then I'd be thrown out, I was threatened like that and…into the middle of night…she made me do it…"

"W, what did she make you do?"

"…Performing a monomane medley, 150 sessions one after another…"

"She just kept me doing them countlessly until they all blurred together…Uganda…Falcon… Ami-chan wants to die…" Ami mumbled as if moaning before she ended up putting her face back down on Ryūji's desk. Off in the distance, Haruta and Noto were whispering between themselves, "Notocchi! That guy's a bourgeoisie!", "Let's think about who we'll associate with from now on." He

noticed that they were staring in his direction with open jealousy, but it didn't have anything to do with him.

"…So cruel…!"

He shivered, chilled to the core, remembering how Taiga had been smiling with seeming kindness when she had invited Ami into her apartment and also her mood later as she had been devouring the meuniere-styled salmon like a bear preparing for hibernation.

Even now as he looked, Taiga and Minori were huddling together and seemed to be laughing uncontrollably at something or another. When Taiga was in a good mood, it always seemed like someone else was suffering instead---Like how Ami had basically collapsed right in front of him.

Once again he was looking at Taiga's well-ordered profile thinking, 'What a dreadful fellow', when,

"Can I speak with you for a moment?"

Kitamura cut into the conversation between Taiga and Minori. Ryūji was wondering what in the world it was

about, as he couldn't hear anything they were saying, but in any case, it seemed unmistakable that Taiga's mood was getting even better.

He looked at Taiga, who was just staring at Minori while unable to look directly at Kitamura's face, and Ami , who seemed to be recalling a monomane repertoire that had unfortunately grown on her as she went "Seichou Matsumoto…Mitsuhide Akechi…". Ryūji had no idea how one would dance or sing those, but comparing the two girls, he thought,

It's just like heaven and hell.

---However, the situation wasn't nearly that simple.

Ryūji realized his mistake when,

"Gua~h!"

It was during afternoon recess as he had happily taken out his bentou from his bag, and was cutting across the classroom to go to his locker to get his stored chopsticks (

Of course, he always washed them thoroughly after eating each day).

"What the heck are you doing?! Gu~h!"

"…"

He became the victim of a random assault.

The culprit was a gloomily silent Taiga. The weapon she had used was a thoroughly chilled can of Oolong tea she had just recently bought. As he had been passing by, she had pressed it against the relatively sensitive back of his neck, causing Ryūji to stand on his tiptoes and contort his whole body.

"Just what the heck, you?! If there's something you want to say then…Gu~h! So stop doing that…Gu~h!"

No matter how hard he tried to avoid her, Taiga just kept coming at him and pressing the cold Oolong tea against him forcefully. She was squinting as if she might go ballistic any second, visibly grinding her teeth with her jaw moving side to side, and crinkling her nose fiercely,

"…My chest, it feels like it's going to burst…!"

"W, what?!"

"It's a horrible feeling!"

"Gua~! Stop it! I'm the one having a hard time!"

He finally wrested the can from her small hands and held it up high out of Taiga's reach. Prowling around like a tiger gone neurotic at the zoo, Taiga was circling Ryūji,

"Geez, no way…! Why…?!"

She kept muttering to herself.

"What, just what in the world happened?"

"…Ooh, no way, but, but…"

"Hey!"

"Nya~!"

Unthinkingly, he had taken the chilled can that was in his hand and tried pressing it against Taiga's nose. Taiga grabbed her nose and jumped,

"What the heck are you doing?!"

"Owowow!"

She had then grabbed and pinched the face of Ryūji, who was standing on his toes and had his arm outstretched. It seemed she was finally back to her senses .

"Geez…Your face left sweat on my hands!"

"You scratched me with your nails! Come on now, if you've got something to say, hurry up and say it! Just what has you so troubled?!"

"…That is…"

Ooh, letting out a single breath Taiga's face contorted with what seemed like regret and she bit her lip. Finally, a few moments later, she lowered her voice as she quickly let him know what problem had led her to committing the assault.

"…Kitamura, this morning he told me…to be more friendly with Ami Kawashima and to even invite her to lunch today…"

"…W,"

Ryūji hesitated and visibly blinked once.

"Why…?"

"That's what I want to ask!"

He could understand how the screaming Taiga was feeling. There was just about no way for that to happen.

The first quarrel at the family restaurant and Taiga's team attack with Minori, Kitamura should have witnessed it all for himself. So just why would he do something like that…It couldn't possibly be that from Kitamura's point of view, it looked like Taiga and Ami might be able to get along, could it? If that's how it was, then that guy should really get his glasses prescription updated as soon as possible.

"…That's…This doesn't seem like it'll be good for anyone…"

Ryūji mumbled quietly and Taiga's face looked extremely pitiful as the two of them just ended up staring at one another.

He had been wondering just what Kitamura had been talking to Taiga about, but he had no idea that it could be

something like that---From what Taiga said, it went something like this.

"I'm aware that Ami's personality is pretty bad. However, if she only interacts with people using that sort of disguise, then no matter how much time passes she'll never make anything close to real friends, you know? So I'm asking Aisaka, who already knows about her real personality, and Aisaka's closest friend, Kushieda, to please take care of Ami. You know, Aisaka, you're one of the few female friends I can count on to do this for me."---Is what Kitamura said.

"Gah!"

Having repeated Kitamura's words, Taiga was twisting her short body around uncomfortably. It seemed like the inescapable conflict was stirring around violently within her.

"I don't want to do it…I really want to refuse…But it's not a joke…It's something Kitamura-kun has asked of me …Or more like, why the heck is he constantly worrying about her anyway…O~h, oo~h, oooh~."

Taiga was grabbing her head as she moaned until finally she ended up squatting down next to Ryūji's feet.

Somewhat confused, Ryūji also crouched down beside her,

"Hey, you could get a hemorrhage like that, you know ?!"

"B, but…! Hey, anyway…he said friend…! After all, we're just friends…! I'm one of his few reliable female friends…Huh, am I supposed to be happy with that?... No way! I'm not happy at all! But, he asked me for help …Should I be happy?...I'm not!"

Without thinking, Ryūji had also started looking breathlessly conflicted. He didn't really have much experience even watching other people deal with their problems. Not saying a word to her, he ended up simply keeping an eye on her for a while.

"Aaah, but…but, but, but!"

Taiga firmly shut her eyes and grabbed onto Ryūji's sleeve. Her fingers just barely hanging on, Taiga opened her mouth and started panting roughly, then a bit later she went 'Umu!' and nodded resolutely to herself. It looked like she had finally come to a decision.

"…I'll bear the unbearable…Tolerate with lots of tolerance!"

"…I, I kind of understand, somehow."

Nodding, Ryūji watched as Taiga stood straight up. Like that, she made long strides and stared with only one goal in mind as she walked quickly.

"Come with me. We're having lunch."

…Dumbstruck. Looking up at the sight in front of her with her mouth partly agape, was Ami Kawashima.

Ami was at her seat holding her bentou box and getting up, and just a little further away going " Ami-chan! Let's hurry to the rooftop!", Maya and Nanako were waiting for her.

"Wha?", Ami was blinking again and again in surprise ---Finally it seemed as though she had returned to her senses. She countered Taiga with a smile so pure it was mockingly hateful.

"Just what are you saying? I've already got plans with Maya and the others."

"Be quiet."

"…W…"

Taiga had overturned Ami's objections with a single command, and as for the Maya and Nanako duo, she simply uttered a single beast-like growl. And with just that,

"Ah, I see. If Aisaka-san says so, then there's no helping it. Let's go, Nanako."

"That's right, no helping it. Well then Ami-chan, see you next time."

The two of them didn't look frightened, but not even giving it too much thought, they nodded in response to the growling voice then gave Ami a quick wave. The creature known as the Palmtop Tiger was probably a pretty well understood being amongst the girls of the class.

However, it was probably natural that Ami wouldn't be able to understand.

"…You, what are you thinking? Telling me to come with you, just what are you planning?"

"We're going to eat lunch together."

"Huh?! This isn't a joke, why would I eat with you?!... Fuh, whatever. I've got a lot of other friends."

"…Michael Jackson doing a bus guide tour…"

Taiga suddenly and drily muttered. It certainly sounded as if she was only speaking to herself, but,

"Hiih~?!"

"…Mona Lisa striking the corner at 200 kilometers an hour…Tsunku desperately trying to sing western-styled music that he cannot sing…It's all within my digital camera…They've already been thoroughly developed… The title is 'A certain model has gone and done it; 150 continuous sessions of monomane'…Possibly, by chance, I might just end up leaking them…"

"S, stop it! Okay! I get it already! It's fine if I just eat with you, right?! That's fine, right?! Damnit!"

About ready to cry, Ami had even forgotten to keep together her facade, and roughly holding her bentou box, she made her way over to Taiga's desk.

Minori was already there on standby,

"Hey Kawashima-kun. I'm starting before you."

She was holding a giant ribbon between her chopsticks …She held that thing that kind of looked like boiled kelp high up in plain sight.

"…W, what is this, you guys…Geez, I don't get what it means."

"Now now, just sit here Miss."

Minori seated Ami to her left, and with her left hand she took a firm hold of Ami's shoulder,

"Here, say 'ah'."

She brought the kelp up near Ami's lips.

"I don't need this!"

---Ami yelled something like that, but,

"…How nice."

The one who unthinkingly muttered that while meticulously keeping an eye on each turn of events was Ryūji. If he could only be that close to Minori, being made to say 'ah', being spoiled by her, and being given that ribbon-styled kelp…Haa…

"Takasu, what are you spacing out with your mouth open for? Let's go."

"…Hm? Eh? Where?"

Suddenly calling out and appearing next to Ryūji before he knew it, Kitamura poked him in the back.

"To where Ami and the others are. I asked Aisaka and Kushieda to invite Ami. Just making the request and then leaving them alone, how could I do something like that?"

"…Just what does that have to do with me?"

"You know I'm not the type to just barge in on a group of girls eating together by myself."

*If it's you, I'm sure it would be fine…*was what Ryūji was thinking, but instead he just said, "It can't be helped.". Actually really pleased, he followed after Kitamura. It might have been bad for Taiga, but for Ryūji, it was greater luck than he could have hoped for. If he could be allowed to spend the lunch break together with Minori, then he didn't really care at all about the showdown between the Tiger and the Chihuahua.

"Hey, please let us join you."

"Oh, if it isn't Kitamura-kun and Takasu-kun. Please sit here."

The only one who went to the trouble to welcome the two boys who stepped into the girls' group with a smile was Minori. Ami on one side was grumbling 'Why? Why did things end up like this?', wrinkling her brow, and

just openly showing her displeasure, and coming to Taiga on the other side,

"…"

She was still silent. Perhaps preoccupied with the presence of Kitamura, who had suddenly shown up on her right side, Taiga's eyes were unfocused like she was in a trance as she couldn't direct her gaze, and her rosy lips were slack, but,

"…~."

As if suddenly remembering that Ami was across from her, Taiga's face filled with anger, but once again preoccupied with Kitamura, it went soft, and then, thinking about Ami once more, she turned sharp; switching back and forth like that, it was hard to tell what kind of thing she was really feeling.

"H, how incredible…"

Taiga's face became so unbelievable that without thinking, Ryūji wasn't breathing; as her right half looked dumbly perverted facing Kitamura and her left half

looked extremely displeased facing Ami---The way her face was perfectly asymmetrical on the left and right, it reminded him perfectly of Baron Ashura.

And yet as things were, it looked like her face and even her mind had reached some sort of precarious balance. She wasn't lashing out at Ami, and considering that Kitamura was around, she was able to smoothly remove the lid from her bentou without her hands trembling or being otherwise overly agitated. Although her face might have turned into something remarkable, the situation didn't really allow for him to say anything one way or another about her expression.

"Well, well, time for the bentou. It's nice to eat together with girls every once in a while, isn't it?"

"…Is that the reason Yūsaku set this whole thing up?"

"Hm? I wonder, what are you talking about? Wah, Kushieda's bentou is so huge this time too! Come on Ami , you take a look at it too!"

"Fufufu, even if the box looks enormous, what's up with the contents seeming so scarce…? Hey look, this one is maroni, and this one is konnyaku."

Discreetly watching Minori as she happily showed off her bentou side dishes, Ryūji was thoroughly savoring this small bit of happiness. He didn't care at all that he wasn't in the conversation. If he could just be near her like this for ten or even twelve minutes, then he would count it as a blessing.

It had been about a month since the failure of last time's attempt at operation 'We want to eat bentous together'. At least this time, he could actually eat his bentou together with Minori. Ahh, how glad he was that Taiga and the Chihuahua were fighting.

While he was deep in thought, he went to remove the top of his bentou box when his breath caught and he came to a standstill. They were about to run into the exact same reason for last time's failure. Taiga's bentou, it had the exact same contents as his bentou.

There was probably no helping it…He shrewdly hid his bentou by covering it with the lid so no one could see the contents. However,

"Ah~, so there are guys who do something like this! Come on, come on, Takasu-kun, what are you acting so secretive for?!"

"Ah!"

Minori had deftly pilfered the lid from him. She had revealed an omelette filled with soybeans, fried bacon and onions, rice topped with seaweed…It was a magnificently handmade bentou with the exact same composition as the one Taiga had already started eating.

"…Umm…Yeah."

Looking back and forth between the two bentous, Minori appeared to be thinking for a while,

"…Well, that's, huh. Hey…Takasu-kun, what's your starsign?"

She casually handed the lid back to him.

"P, Pisces."

"I'm a toilet seat. Not!"

Ahahahaha~---But her eyes revealed that her laughter was only a pretense.

Minori had likely sensed how delicately horrible things were between Ami and Taiga, and so rather than

setting Taiga off by putting forth any questions about the relationship between Ryūji and Taiga, she had probably been thinking desperately in her own way for some means to preserve the miraculous balance that had been established.

"J, just what kind of thing are you saying while we're eating?"

"Sor~ry! I'm really a knee~

”

At the time, he had felt relieved thinking perhaps, by some stroke of luck, they were able to shift the conversation smoothly enough that things would somehow end agreeably enough.

Completely unnoticed, Ami had stretched her arm out across the table and suddenly taken the lid off of Ryūji’s bentou, leaving it exposed again. She moved so fast that Ryūji unfortunately had no chance to react.

“Why is it that the contents of Aisaka’s bentou and Takasu’s bentou are exactly the same? If I think about it, the two of them were together yesterday as well.”

With a twitch, Taiga’s shoulder started shaking.

At the same time, the classroom that had been full of liveliness just moments earlier suddenly came to a dead standstill in that instant.

“…She asked…”, “She really did it…”, “That thing we weren’t supposed to talk about…”. Eventually people started whispering quietly, in low voices that betrayed their fear.

"Eh?...W, what? Why did it suddenly become all quiet ? Did I do something?"

Only the recently transferred Ami didn't know.

If anyone was to ask the Palmtop Tiger about her relationship with Ryūji, then they could look forward to a disaster of epic proportions. That was something that all the members of their class were aware of, as it had been practically beaten into them. So concerning those two…even if anyone was wondering about what kind of relationship the two of them had, absolutely no one would actually say anything out loud. The Palmtop Tiger had said she wasn't going out with anyone, so she wasn't going out with anyone. She had said not to speak about such trivial things again, so absolutely no one dared to speak of it. And yet, the newcomer had ended up doing it...

Struck by the nearly explosive tension, no one even moved their chopsticks. All conversation also came to a halt as everyone listened in to see how Taiga would react . If she showed any sign of anger, they'd have to start running away as soon as possible---

"…What a weirdo. Does something like that bother you?"

Finally, the one who calmly replied was Taiga.

Her expression had reverted to her normal pretty face that was like a French doll's as she spoke in a voice that was unexpectedly quiet and level like usual.

"Then, it'll be fine with this, right?"

"Ah, my…"

Unfortunately, that was as much of an objection as Ryūji could make. Taiga deftly stretched out her hand, snatched Ryūji's bentou, and then started noisily shoveling food down her throat…In three seconds flat she had eaten all of his omelette and fried foods.

Then full and puffing out her face, there were some specks of food at the corners of her mouth as she started speaking somewhat indistinctly,

"Sho, now there'sh, no problem…Mine is, an omelette and fried dishes, bentou. Ryūji's, is a seaweed bentou."

She returned the now pitiful looking bentou box back to Ryūji. Relieved sighs could be heard here and there within the classroom, and slowly, the sounds of an ordinary afternoon recess began to return. It seemed like they had somehow avoided the Palmtop Tiger's rampage .

The only one to suffer a casualty was Ryūji.

"That's…! My bentou is…!"

It was so horrible that, without thinking, he felt like he was going to cry. However, out of nowhere a pair of chopsticks appeared and bestowed him with a single meatball.

"There. Now, Takasu-kun has a meatball bentou."

"Ka, Kawashima…!"

With an angelic smile, Ami had shared part of her meal. But, while making that smile,

"Hey, why do you all let Aisaka do whatever she wants? Does she have some kind of hold over you?"

She had hit a sore spot. He wasn't sure if he would call it a weakness, but he could think of some things concerning himself…With the timing and all, things would always just end up that way…Of course he didn't say anything like that, but if he remained silent, it would end up badly. The one who responded instead,

"Ryūji, you know, he was my dog in a previous life. Wondering what his master was saying and just wagging his tail was his only response. It's the joy of being a dog."

That was Taiga.

With her awesome smile, she seemed overwhelming… He wanted to retort, like 'Just what are you saying?', but,

"Now now, even though you two are fated to be together~!"

It was just like Minori to select that moment to mess around with them. Taiga and Ryūji took a simultaneous breath.

""No way.""

They shook their heads in harmony. Ami's reaction to what happened in front of her,

"…Fu~~h. Such good rapport…"

She just barely narrowed her eyes and was speaking under her breath in an almost singsong manner. He heard it indistinctly so he just might have misheard--- Ami-chan, isn't that interesting~…Or something like that .

Going 'Fuh' and smirking, it didn't seem like Taiga planned to do anything more concerning Ami for the time being. She took her chopsticks and was just about to go back to her bentou when,

"Ohh, Aisaka really eats quite a lot, doesn't she? Though I do think that's much better than dieting."

"…!"

Perhaps shocked by Kitamura's words, she unthinkingly dropped her chopsticks.

It didn't matter if she was gaining or losing weight; the words 'eats quite a lot' to a girl was the same as the death

penalty---Especially if it was coming from her unrequited love.

Ahh…Worn out and completely drained, Ryūji just discreetly watched Taiga as her mouth continued to flap open and shut.

* * *

The chance for Taiga to avoid being labeled as 'a girl who eats a lot' (Although no one went so far as to actually say anything like that out loud anyway) came after school, right after the class ending formalities.

"He~y, excuse me, everyone! Please listen for a bit!"

Kitamura's voice resounded within the noisy classroom, and the people who were preparing to leave turned to look up.

"Okay, as I think you all know, today is when the student council holds its monthly volunteer neighborhood cleanup! Actually, this time, because the normally abundant seniors are going to be preoccupied with preparing for tomorrow's mock exams, the number of participants is going to be extraordinarily low! Everyone, I sincerely hope you'll listen to my request and participate!"

---Pretending to not hear him, most of them eventually went back to what they were doing, getting ready to leave. Of course, Ryūji was also among that majority. It's not like he disliked cleaning, but this was a different matter altogether. Because if it was an entire neighborhood, then no matter how much he persevered, he'd never be able to make it perfectly clean. He knew well enough that participating would only make him frustrated.

While this monthly neighborhood volunteer cleanup might have looked like it was simply a way to help

people, the seniors who were in a delicate situation really thought of it as a means to get more positive remarks on their recommendation letters, like 'enthusiastic even with volunteer work' or 'acts leader-like' or in some cases ' dedicated and extraordinarily participant', depending on how much they did. That's why, besides the members of the student council, the majority of participants were always seniors, and then the sports-related clubs would have to take turns sending a few of their members each time. It was basically an event that had nothing to do with first- and second-years who didn't belong to any of the sports clubs. So no matter how much Kitamura would try to rally them to participate, for anyone to actually voluntarily raise their hand or anything would be---

"All right Takasu! So you're coming!"

"---Huh?!"

A bizarre phenomenon.

For some unexplainable reason, Ryūji's right hand was forcefully stretched way up high.

"All right, I'll be waiting. Change into your jersey and meet up at the front gate! All right, now I can save face

with the president…Since I'm not stuck with zero like I had expected~. Well then, I've already written your name down, so you can't escape, okay?"

Holding a pen in one hand, Kitamura looked pleased as he eventually skipped out of the classroom with a jaunty gait.

"W, w, wai…Hey you!"

The one holding and lifting up Ryūji's right arm after having slipped in next to him completely unnoticed was Taiga. She had taken a firm stance, grabbed his elbow, and held his arm up high with all her might.

"Hey, let go! Just what did you make me do?! If I said I 'm going to participate and then don't go, I'm going to get a demerit for skipping out on an extracurricular activity, you know?!"

Taiga pulled her arm back and in front of Ryūji's staring eyes, started biting her nails somewhat nervously ,

"I'll take responsibility, okay…I'll come and participate with you."

"Huh?...Wha?!"

---So to put it simply, because she wanted to participate, she was making him do it as well. While Taiga's face was flushed pink with embarrassment and she played with her uniform's ribbon, she whispered in a tiny voice.

"It's just that I don't want him thinking of me as simply a big eater…I want him to think that I was forcing myself to eat so I could participate in the neighborhood cleanup, that I was doing it so I'd have a lot of energy…"

"Couldn't it be that maybe you just want to spend time with Kitamura?"

"…I guess you could say something like that as well."

"Couldn't you have participated without dragging me into it?"

"That's just it, it's too embarrassing! Just imagine such a situation, geez you're such a dim-witted guy!"

He was pulling together his resolve as he tried to think of a retort to her harsh comment. Then, feeling someone nudge and poke the back of his gakuran uniform, he turned around, and,

“I’m so glad that Takasu-kun is participating as well!”

Minori was standing right there. She was holding her bag and her jersey.

“This time the girls’ softball club has to participate. As the club captain, I ended up having to do this and I had been thinking that it was going to be so troublesome. We’re comrades, friends!"

Today as well, this energetic girl’s smiling face that dazzled like the sun brightened Ryūji’s heart immediately. Bedazzled and with his temperature steadily rising, Ryūji was pretty much in a daze,

“Is…Is that so…?”

“That’s right. But, to voluntarily participate. Wow, Takasu-kun is such an extraordinary guy! I’m so moved!”

Uwawa, he was being praised…!

Desperately trying with both hands to hide his face, which he was sure was completely red, his eyes swelled up with a seemingly murderous look. It was just embarrassment, though.

"Minorin, I've decided to go too. As Ryūji's associate."

"Oh really?! All right, let's go get changed together! I'll be waiting in the hallway."

"Okay, I'll be there soon."

Side by side, two people watched Minori's back as she practically bounced out of the classroom,

"…Well then, don't you have anything to say?"

"…T, thank you…!"

'Well, as long as you understand' is what Taiga seemed to be saying as she nodded her head knowingly.

"Although I knew that Minorin would be there, I didn't have to invite you at all."

"…I don't remember being invited, but I do recall being forced to raise my hand."

Despite whatever they said, the two of them were both in a pretty good mood, and after getting their own jerseys and bags, they left the classroom. They started walking off, Ryūji going towards the boys' locker room and Taiga and Minori heading towards the girls' locker room, but,

"Wait!"

A flashy and sweet voice brought the three of them to a halt. Ryūji turned around and, without thinking, he felt like adjusting his glasses, though he didn't actually wear any. Taiga was probably feeling the same way, and he turned his ferociously widened eyes to look at her,

"…What?"

She growled in a low voice. Yet,

"I'm so glad I caught up to you! I decided to do this as well! Because I've just recently transferred here, I want to get used to the school events!"

Widely smiling---Ami's angelic smile wasn't affected at all by Taiga's glare.

"Umm…Did Kitamura tell you to participate? I think it's better if you quit now; it's not really what I'd call an event."

Without thinking, Ryūji tried to give her some serious advice, but Ami just prettily shook her head side to side.

"Yūsaku didn't say anything like that to me, okay? I decided that I wanted to participate all on my own. If I don't exercise, then I won't be using up that extra flab, isn't that right? Minori-chan?"

"Ho, that's right. That's dieting, you know."

Not looking surprised at all, Minori was nodding understandingly.

Looking at Minori out of the corner of her eye, Taiga didn't look amused and there was a crease in her brow.

"Hm, this way?"

Then Ami deftly extended her arm and wrapped Ryūji 's arm with her own---At least, that's what it felt like, he thought. Before she really could,

"Gah…"

"…The girls' locker room is over this way."

Taiga, who was making a gloomy expression, was firmly gripping Ami by the collar from behind with her right hand like a prison warden. Dragging the nearly choking Ami in that manner, Taiga and Minori set off towards the girls' locker room.

"I, I can walk on my own, Aisaka-san."

"It's fine, it's fine, I'll take you there, Kawashima-san."

Standing there without thinking as he watched them bicker deceptively, Ryūji just sighed as he eventually came back to his senses. Well, the boys' locker room wasn't in the same direction after all. Pulling himself together, he started walking…As he walked, he brought a hand up to his unusually noisy chest.

The expression Ami had when she looked his way, tilting her head and going 'Hm, this way?', it was so unusually sweet, beautiful, and pure…No matter what, it was so cute he felt like he could die. It didn't depend on what her actual personality was like.

Of course, she being cute was to be expected, since she was a model, but just because he saw something nice, it wouldn't change the truth. He really did feel a bit happy, that was his honest feeling as a man, but still, it didn't change reality.

'"All right, everybody! You should already be fully committed! I won't allow anyone to skip out, you guys~! Let's get pumped up and do it, all of you!"'

The weather was rather cloudy as they were out beneath a gold-colored sky chockful of clouds.

Passing through the megaphone, a rolling, overtly masculine voice was resounding to those upon the ground. And then from nearby,

"These words touch my heart today, as well. As expected of the president!"

Kitamura, who was also the student council vice-president, was going 'Ye~ah, let's go!' as he continued to clap enthusiastically.

In front of the school gate after school, the nearly twenty students who had gathered were all making similarly uncomfortable expressions while the leader of the cleanup event shouted at them from above…In other words, they were all looking up at the student president. The happy students who were making their way home continued to stream past them continuously, looking over as though amused and saying things like "So they're doing it again".

"…W, what is this…?"

Seeing it for the first time, Ami was probably quite shaken up.

"…That's our school's student council president. The opposing candidates got zero votes; it's the charisma of an absolute ruler."

"E, eh…So then that person is seriously like that…"

"'Seriously' you say?"

"Well, Yūsaku was telling me some things before. Like , that Yūsaku had joined the student council because there was an amazing upperclassman there or something …"

'"Have you put on your work gloves?! Got your trashbag?! Confirmed your area?!"'

A mild ‘yeah’ was the pitiful response,

‘“You frickin’ idiots---~!”’

Standing in a broad militaristic-looking stance, the student president revealed a white throat while vigorously shouting in an overwhelming voice.

‘“You’re not respecting this neighborhood! If that’s the extent of your willpower, then you scum will be tossed from the ship! Respond with more gusto!”’

“Yeeeaaaah---~!”

'“You’re all too noisy----~!...All right then, this month we’ll be doing the customary neighborhood cleanup like always. Be really careful not to hurt yourselves or anything. If we find you slacking off and eating, I’ll punish you on the spot!...Well, I won’t tell you just how much~.”'

The president, whose lips were curling into a nihilistic smile---Sumire Kanou, a senior, gave a pronounced flick of her beautiful black hair. With her jersey, work gloves, and trashbag, she was making a very diligent looking pose where she stood. She had snow white skin and

almond eyes, her abundant ink black hair was well-groomed and smooth, and her lips were crimson even without any lipstick…Like a graceful Yamato Nadeshiko, she had the image of a cool Japanese-styled young lady. But on the inside,

'"O~kay. Well then, let's frickin' go guys. The goal: one full trashbag per person! Because the number of participants is so few, that assignment should be easily doable. Well, though I say assignment, it doesn't have to be exact or anything, but in any case, make sure you don' t go around behaving sloppily in front of the people outside the school grounds. Frickin' show the world your volunteer spirit!"

Manly, as if that one word was carved into her soul, she was an expertly commanding female shogun… Scratch that, to put it more bluntly, she was rather like a mob boss or a sumo coach.

"…Somehow, it's amazing…She's pretty, but she's kind of rough…"

Whispering from Ryūji's side, Ami was captivated as well, seemingly unable to take her eyes off the mob boss whose appearance and actions completely didn't match.

Anyone would react like that their first time. Like 'yeah, yeah', Ryūji was nodding his head understandingly,

"But you know, I've heard that she's had the top grades ever since she entered the school and she's also known as the legendary president who swiftly brought the crumbling student council out of bankruptcy."

"Takasu-kun, that's quite detailed."

"I was just reciting what I heard from Kitamura."

Looking unusually excited, Kitamura was continuing to respond with applause after each segment of speech came from the beautiful mob boss up on the platform. Ryūji wondered if he was trying to get everyone excited.

"…Does he think so highly of her…?"

Really, Ryūji was thinking that Kitamura had the stronger impression of a 'leader', but it seemed that even if he was a 'subordinate', he was going to work hard at fulfilling his duties.

However, with the way Kitamura was acting, Ryūji wondered just how Taiga would perceive the situation. She was standing a little bit apart from him next to

Minori, but he could easily make out her gloomy and displeased looking face. He wasn't sure if it was an unconscious or purposeful act, but she was restlessly writing the character for 'kill' on the ground with the tip of her shoe.

"Now then, you have one hour starting now! You absolutely cannot be late coming back! We're not going to call it over until everyone has returned!"

Sumire's shouts through the megaphone were followed by the sharp sounds of the student council members blowing their whistles, and the twenty or so students made their way past the school gates, going forth out into the world to hunt for trash. Anyway, there was at least one fellow mixed in there whose goal was to get more acquainted with the student council vice-president.

"The range of this cleanup is pretty large, isn't it…Oh, we found something right away."

Ryūji had just passed the gate when he spotted an old magazine near the school's perimeter wall, and he was leaning over just about to grasp it with his gloves,

"No!"

He was grabbed by the elastic band of his jersey and pulled back up. In the same fashion, he was dragged away. When he turned around jolted by the indecency, the one standing behind him with a stern face was Minori. She was going 'tut tut' and wagging her index finger,

"You can't, Takasu-kun. The area around the school is for the seniors. It's customary that we as the lowerclassmen have to go out and take care of the more troublesome areas."

"R, really?"

"Yeah! See, just look there!"

In the direction where Minori pointed, there was a plain girl who looked like a senior going “This is such a hassle…” as she tossed the magazine into her trashbag. Perhaps worn out from studying for the exam, she was letting out a really long sigh as she struck her hips like an old woman.

“I see…”

“Now then, the devout second years still have a bit farther to go.”

She smiled---Ahh, he felt like it had been so long since he last saw such a sincere smile. Faced directly with Minori’s smiling face that dazzled and shone like the sun , Ryūji was completely ensnared. Her dimples on both cheeks and the tip of her nose that was lightly flushed by the sun appeared healthy and seriously wonderful. At that very moment, Ryūji felt himself being captivated all over again.

It didn’t help that behind Minori’s back,

“Huh, this piece of trash reminds me of Kawashima-san. It looks like my monomane repertoire’s grown again.”

"Ooh, Aisaka-san, such jokes~! You're making me laugh! Ah, doesn't this piece of trash over here look like Aisaka-san? It's so ridiculously short~."

The two darkish and bewitching flowers, who viciously competed as they bloomed near one another, seemed to enjoy making mocking comments back and forth…Just watching them made him tired,

"…Taiga, cut it out already. Let's go, come on."

Hitting Taiga in the rear with the empty trashbag, he was only trying to pull them apart. However,

"I've told you before, don't touch my butt!...Geez…If you all keep bothering me…"

Seeming extra sensitive, Taiga bared her fangs and then quickly started walking off ahead. It had to have been because she was worried about Kitamura and the student president. Ami also made a displeased expression, turning around to face away from Taiga as she crossed her arms.

Perhaps sensing something as she looked at those two, Minori lowered her voice and whispered, “Hey, hey” to get Ryūji’s attention.

“You know…I was thinking it this afternoon too, but doesn’t it seem like Taiga and Ami are kind of disagreeable? Just maybe.”

It was a remark that made him think ‘You’re worrying about that just now?’, but since he was being asked by Minori, he couldn’t keep from answering.

“Mm, I guess there have been quite a few unfortunate misunderstandings. You could say they got off to a rough and complicated start.”

“Is that so~...Well I guess it can’t be helped.”

The two of them ended up walking side by side at a relaxed pace---Ryūji was so excited he was trembling. At that moment, he was actually walking together with Minori. It felt almost exactly like a date as they ambled leisurely beneath the trees with newly sprouted leaves. If it weren’t for the mass of people in front and behind who

were wearing their jerseys, the scene would probably look just like a date. He wondered if a day would come when such a scene would become reality…

"Hm, Taiga and Kawashima. You know, about Kawashima, she's nothing like I imagined her to be in the beginning, though I don't mean anything bad when I say that…I want Taiga to be able to get along with everyone, but she has some rather difficult points about her, you know…I wonder if this combination is really as bad as it seems…Relationships between women are complex after all."

Minori was nodding to herself while making a slightly troubled face. Ryūji was also nodding the same way. Somehow, he was feeling an unusually strong sensation of togetherness as he walked side by side with Minori. If the feeling was genuine, then it would be the first time they had a direct 'connection' involving neither Taiga nor Kitamura.

If that was the case, he really needed to nurture it---His eyes turned even sharper than usual as he decided to try going on the offensive, even if only a little.

"W, well since Kushieda is around, I'm not really worried that much about Taiga, you know."

His voice eventually gave out on him, but yes, he had at least been able to say something normally for the moment.

"That's the kind of thing that I should be saying. I think that as long as Takasu-kun is around then Taiga should be just fine."

As always, Ryūji was being misunderstood…but at least, it seemed like Minori held him in relatively high esteem. He could say that she even had good feelings towards him. As they were both smiling, Minori's and Ryūji's gazes connected. Then, one more step. Just one more step to becoming much closer. He should say something now---what he ought to say as a man. Ryūji's eyes became bloodshot as his thoughts seethed, and he tried to clear his throat that felt constricted.

'More than being around Taiga, I really hope I can be close to Kushieda…' That's what he's going to say. Discreetly licking his dried lips, he casually put his nervously trembling fists into his pockets. With this timing it should sound natural, and if it at least seemed

jokish rather than with some weird meaning, then he could still follow up on it. It was now or never---

"M,"

"Ryūji~!"

Bam! He was forcefully pushed aside,

"Ryūji, hey, there's a problem! Ooh, what should I do?!"

"…"

He couldn't speak. He was able to check himself just at the brink of collapse, but as he looked up at Taiga's face, he couldn't get himself to speak.

"Come with me for a bit! Over this way!"

Like that, she practically dragged him into an alleyway.

"Kitamura, you know, he's been staying next to the student council president the whole time! The whole time, he hasn't left her side! He's just happily smiling and barely noticing that I'm there! I mustered up the

courage and tried telling him, 'I was with Ryūji, so I came too', but just what do you think he said after that?! ' Ah, is that right? I hadn't noticed, thank you! You're really helping!'---That's it. That's all he said! Is that the way to speak to a girl who has confessed to you before?! Hey, what do you think?!"

Getting out her complaints in one go without taking a breath, Taiga got even closer to Ryūji.

"So…I knew it, there's just no hope, is there?! W, what should I do?! Tell me what you think, I won't get mad so just go ahead and say it!"

"W, what I think and all…If I can speak honestly..."

"Yeah, yeah."

"…I wish you could have waited…it was going so well with Kushieda…"

"…What's that you're saying?"

Close up, Taiga's expression was calm as she filled up with anger.

"Even though things aren't going well for me, things are going well for the lowly Ryūji?! Huh?! You're being really audacious!"

"I, it's not that big a deal! You don't need to get angry, do you?!"

"I am angry! No way, I won't allow such a thing! I told you before didn't I, that until things go well with me and Kitamura, I won't let you be happy! You…heartless fiend !"

Like that, the tyrannical Taiga quickly shot out of the alleyway,

"Taiga, what happened? You popped up and then suddenly disappeared~."

"Minorin!"

She threw herself at Minori, who was just standing idly by, and clingingly coupled arms with her.

"I, I don't want to be here anymore…It doesn't matter where, but let's go far, far away from here with just the two of us!"

"You want to elope? No problem, I'll make you my bride."

Minori's face was absolutely full of compassion and empathy as she gently took hold of Taiga's small shoulders.

So then just like that, the two of them huddled together and ended up walking off. Not even giving Ryūji a final wave or anything, they seemed to be having a lot of fun.

"D, damn…"

Moaning regretfully and just standing still, the abandoned Ryūji could only stare at Minori's back as she got further and further away. Even though he had been trying so hard to make progress---

"You okay?"

"Eh?"

Being suddenly called out, he turned around in surprise. Perhaps coming out because the objectionable Taiga had left, Ami had come to stand next to him.

"Just now you got jumped by Aisaka-san, didn't you? I saw it. You weren't hurt, were you?"

"E…A, nah…I'm used to it."

"Takasu-kun, how sad. Aisaka-san and Minori-chan both left you, didn't they, and I have no idea where Yūsaku has gone."

"Ah…Hm."

He just noticed, but the other students who were ambling around them were taking glances at Ami as if she was dazzling. Even though they were staring intently at the rumored beauty, because 'that Takasu' was standing next to her, it seemed like no one could come and talk to her. It looked like outside the classroom, the name Ryūji Takasu was still on par with the Palmtop Tiger when it came to striking fear.

A few girls who had some courage went 'Ami-cha~n' and waved as they passed by. When Ami smiled and waved back, they became excitedly happy, going 'kyaa, kyaa'. And yet soon enough Ami turned her back on the girls,

"Well then, as those who were left behind, we should get along! Hey, which way do you want to go?"

She looked up at Ryūji with a dazzling angelic smile.

"U…mm…Couldn't you just go together with those girls just now?"

"It's fine, it's fine, I don't know those people at all anyway. I'll go with Takasu-kun. Let's try going to the edge of the river. That's within our range of cleaning, isn't it?"

"…I don't really mind, but…"

'Do you really have no choice but to go with me?', he didn't even have time to ask such a question before Ami started happily walking off in large strides. And then she pivoted and turned around.

"Come on, or I'll leave you behind!"

Then just like a scene from a movie, she extended a delicate hand. There was simply no way he was going to

take hold of it, and instead he just started walking quickly until he passed by her. It was exactly as if the guy who instilled fear was feeling shy.

* * *

Byo~yo~ing…Caught on the end of the trembling stick was a PET bottle floating on the water's surface.

"G, got, it…!"

"Keep going!"

Pulling the empty bottle against the river's current, Ryūji finally breathed. He shook his arm that was exhausted from being extended as far as he could manage, and then while making sure not to touch it, he finally dropped the bottle into his trashbag.

"Haa…With this, I guess I'm about halfway done…"

"About the same for me. We still have to search a little more, keep it up!"

At the river bank of the class A river that flowed around the edge of town, Ryūji and Ami were being careful not to get their shoes wet as they started walking again along the lower part of the concrete levee. The sky had become slightly thicker with clouds, and down on the ground, the grass that didn't seem to have anyone to take care of it was growing wherever it wanted, even popping up from cracks in the concrete.

There was a faint grassy smell as well as an odor coming from the not-quite-clean river water. Walking in front of Ami, Ryūji sneaked a sigh. This work was more tiring than he could have imagined. The trashbags that swung from their hands weren't even close to being filled . Even if they were told that the quota didn't have to be exact, there was no way they were going to get away with only so much.

Until just recently they had been searching for trash along the upper part of the river bank on the boardwalk, but they were having a hard time finding enough trash so they had eventually dropped down this far. Then,

"Uh-oh…"

"Kya!"

Splash, barely avoiding a wave coming from the same direction as the wind, Ryūji turned around to face Ami. It seemed that Ami had also been able to safely avoid the wave, but,

"Haa…Enough already…This totally sucks…"

With a gulp, Ryūji didn't breathe.

The bit of concealed monologue that he had inadvertently heard was tinged with irritation, and Ami's brow that was deeply affected with a profound wrinkle seemed out of place. However worn out as Ryūji might have felt, Ami must have been at least as tired. There were signs that her normal front was about to give out on her.

It was certainly true that the sky was gloomy and the wind was harsh, and it didn't help that the work they were doing was boringly dull. Even though it had become quite chilly, it would still take quite some time before they could finish. They weren't even getting any closer right now. In such a poor situation, even if the

person wasn't like Ami, it would probably be normal to be in a foul mood. And moreover, there was an overly delicate atmosphere with just the two of them. They couldn't keep up a conversation, things were awkward and unpleasant, and the shy Ryūji couldn't come up with even one usable joke to lighten the mood. All he could do was try as hard as possible to remain calm so she wouldn 't think negatively.

"A, are you okay?"

"Eh? Yeah! Totally fine~! This is just like we're exploring, so I'm having fun! I like this kind of thing~!"

Looking up, Ami's pretty face was fortunately still holding an angelic smile---Yet, that disparity between appearance and her actual feelings made him scared all over again. With the way things were now, he probably would feel better if she had shown her displeasure.

"Hey, you know…Don't push yourself. If you're tired, you can take a break. It's not like you'll be executed just because you didn't reach the quota. Something like this should be pretty tough for a girl."

That was Ryūji's best possible attempt at getting her to be more relaxed, but,

"Come on, I told you already, I'm really okay!"

In return, Ami just reinforced her front. She made a big show of waving her hand in front of her face, upturning her sparkling Chihuahua-like eyes, and tilting her petite head as she continued to coat her words in honey.

"The whole time I was thinking, you know? It would be really nice if we could have a chance to chat leisurely like this. So…Owah!"

It happened right then.

A mischievous and forceful wind had created a wave more powerful than any of the ones from before along the water surface. Fleeing onto the slope instantly, Ryūji had been able to avoid trouble, but for Ami, who had been acting all sweet while located at the zero mark,

"…No…way…"

It had been too late to escape---It was unfortunate.

"You okay?! For me to have avoided it alone…What should I…"

"…"

It didn't seem like there was going to be any way to smooth this over, not even with her usual inconstancy. Ami was staring down at the ends of her now dripping wet uniform and jersey; she was just frozen, not saying anything nor showing any emotion.

"Ka, Kawashima…"

But, finally, he could see the corners of Ami's lips begin to slowly waver. It seemed like she was trembling, trying as hard as she could to soften the intense sharpness in her eyes as she looked up.

"Ho…"

She was an expert at controlling her emotions. It was slow, but sure enough Ami was putting forth a desperate amount of effort to bring back her angelic smile. Then, as she was fully in the process of pulling herself back together.

"Hih-~"

Her face froze once again. As Ami continued to drip, at the base of her legs above her shoelaces, some weird

sort of blackish dripping things were moving around, shaking, and bouncing…she looked at them for a full three seconds,

"Ii~…"

Then screamed.

"Yaaaaa, gyaaaaaaaa, get them off, get them off!"

Letting out an unbridled scream, Ami collapsed right then and there. At the end of her flailing legs,

"D, don't move! I said, don't move! Don't kick me in the face, I'll remove the tadpoles! Stop moving around!"

Two, no wait, three tadpoles were calmly hanging on. While Ami was hysterically screaming and barely conscious, he somehow removed her shoes,

"Saved!"

Ryūji was then able to return the small tadpoles back to the river.

"…~,…~,…~."

Yet.

On the ground facing up, Ami had a petrified look on her face, her breath was faint, and she wasn't moving. Her hair was miserably disheveled, her legs were carelessly spread, her jersey was wet up to the shin, and needless to say, her socks were drenched with the muddy water as well. This was such an unbecoming appearance for the one called 'Ami Kawashima-chan'.

Ryūji timidly approached her,

"Y, your shoes…I'll just leave them here. Okay. They're a little wet, but at least the tadpoles aren't there anymore."

He gently placed the sports shoes near Ami's feet. Ami shifted her large eyes and looked down at her shoes. Then,

"A, A, A,…"

Ami-chan---He heard her low mutter.

He heard, and then in the next instant.

"I don't want to do this anymo------~re!"

Taking her shoes in her white hands, she threw them at the embankment as she angrily cried out.

"…Wa…Uwa…"

Without thinking, Ryūji covered his mouth with his hands and didn't say anything more than that. Her disguise was finally undone…

Ami's shoulders bobbed as she panted like an animal, and then saying things like "Geez, I can't stand this anymore", "No more", and "Ami-chan is going back, definitely going back", Ami continued to quickly spout angrily---

"Ah?!"

When she turned around, their gazes met. It looked like she had finally come back to reality. They stayed silent like that for a few seconds, just staring at one another,

"…Teehee!"

Ami had her clenched hands at her mouth and was desperately trying to give a pure smile.

"Just kidding! It was a joke, a joke! Come on Takasu-kun, such a scary face~!"

You're the one who's scary…but there was no way he could say that. Continuing to look back now and then with a laughing smile, Ami was valiantly climbing up the embankment with only her socks on her feet,

"Here we go, here we go…Ah~! There they are! I'm so glad, I found them~!"

Holding the shoes that had been cast aside with both her hands and smiling with her whole face, she yelled with an extremely forced sweetness while waving dramatically. Then she put her shoes on right there,

"Takasu-kun, let's have a race to the embankment!"

"…Eh…"

"The loser has to hand over all their collected trash to the winner! That'll make one full quota! Ready, set, go!"

---Staring as Ami started noisily dashing up the embankment, Ryūji was thinking. *Hand over the trash, she says…didn't she go and leave behind her trashbag,* is what he thought.

Left with no choice, he took both of their bags, one in each hand and quickly started scaling the embankment. He didn't fully comprehend what they were doing, but he just had to go with it in this case.

Ami's back had disappeared into the greenery and out of his sight some time ago. Now that no one was watching her, he wondered if she was trying to pull together her broken appearance. It would probably be better if he took his time making his way up there. Then,

"So slow!"

On top of the embankment, her completely recovered and pretty face quickly peeked out from the other side of the grass.

"Takasu-kun lost! But, I'll properly help you to search for trash, so you don't need to worry!"

Speaking with such a bright voice as she looked down at him, it seemed like Ami had recovered her flawlessly smiling face. However,

"…That's enough, you can stop that."

"Eh? What do you mean by 'that'?"

In contrast with her words, she couldn't hide the expression in her eyes that shook as if disturbed--- Because Ami's eyes were too large. Then again, it was the same for Ryūji who was already too tired to try and coat his intentions.

"…Is there any meaning in this? Going to such lengths just so I'll like you, just what value is there in that?...I won't say anything to anyone about it, so you can just give it a rest and go back to how you were a second ago."

In response to his blunt statement,

"…I wonder, what are you saying? I don't get what you mean."

Ami just looked at him blankly with her rounded eyes. Even if she was running on willpower alone, it looked like she planned to keep it up until the bitter end. Even after she had crumbled some time ago, she showed an above ordinary stubbornness. But Ryūji wouldn't let his own stubbornness lose. After all, he was used to it after dealing with the Palmtop Tiger day in and day out.

"…If you want to say you don't know, then that's fine. Do whatever you want. But, I'm the one who really doesn't understand. Just why did you come out here and try so hard to do such troublesome work? There's no point even if you do it."

It wasn't exactly criticism, but he just had to ask. Because he really thought this kind of work was troublesome, and if it was a part of some plan to build her reputation, then it didn't seem worth it. Even if she didn't do something like this, it was already the widespread opinion in class that Ami was a good person.

However, Ami,

"…You, don't understand the point?...You don't understand. Haa…"

Unexpectedly dropping the smile, she whispered.

Such a clear expression, it made Ryūji stop in his tracks. Without even thinking about what kind of face he was making, he focused his eyes, but the wind kicked up, tugging at Ami's hair and hiding her face.

"…Surprisingly, it's not so simple. Takasu-kun…I can't really make you understand this kind of thing…"

I only meant to play with that midget, but now it's like I'm out of order---For some reason, it felt like her wispish voice echoed with self-derision.

"…Eh? What do you mean by 'play'…?"

However, when he asked her that in reply,

"Hm? What? You heard it like that? How strange, must have been your mistake."

Brushing back her hair, Ami was wearing her same-as-ever angelic smile as she looked down at Ryūji.

"I even said it before, but me being here like this is because I've wanted to talk leisurely with Takasu-kun on our own, you know? That, maybe it's ambiguous like that?"

Sweet words and a pretty smile…That was Ami's defining and familiar appearance. The usual Ami who never really meant anything no matter what she might say and treated others lightly.

Ryūji sighed, deciding to let the matter drop. No matter what he might say, this Ami wasn't going to tell him anything at all. If she wanted to keep acting like that, then that was fine; it had nothing to do with him anymore.

Then, Ami suddenly looked to the sky.

"…Rain…?"

The cold drops started falling heavily on Ryūji's face as well.

"…It's really coming down…"

On a bench beneath an arbor shelter that was situated along the embankment walkway, Ami was sitting while embracing her slender legs as she muttered sounding almost surprised.

She had gone back to her former self, and although no more than ten minutes could have possibly passed---It wasn't a situation where they could continue with the trash collection.

Just like Ami had said, it was really coming down outside of the simple styled arbor shelter that was just a roof supported by pillars. It was being bombarded by the sudden downpour.

Massive clouds covered the sky, and although it was still around 4 o'clock, it was unusually dark. The slanting raindrops continued to fall violently onto the soft dirt of the earth, penetrating the ground like bullets. It had only been a few minutes since it started raining, but here and there puddles were gathering and flowing like small streams, and before long the class A river at the bottom of the embankment seemed to turn hazy as if in a mist.

The powerful, roaring wind was making the shelter creak,

"…This shelter might end up getting blown away…"

"That's impossible."

She tried to laugh, but Ami looked seriously frightened.

"I wonder if we'll be okay, really…"

"With the rain like this, it should stop if we wait a few minutes, probably."

Not looking reassured by anything being said by Ryūji , who was standing while leaning against one of the pillars, Ami's pale face was plastered with her dismally wet hair. This was already beyond a matter of actual or feigned personalities. Even the previously delicate awkwardness had basically disappeared with the appearance of the storm. Just trembling slightly while appearing cold, Ami was looking up worriedly at the stormy sky. The jersey she wore and in fact her whole body must have been completely drenched,

"…Achoo!"

She gave a small sneeze like a baby mouse. It was quite different from the odd sounds of Taiga's sneezes, and almost reflexively he wanted to remove his jacket so he could drape it over her shoulders. However, Ryūji's own clothes were just as drenched,

"You must be cold…We have that trashbag we're not using, want to wear it? All you'd have to do is make a hole for your head."

"Eh?! I'm not doing something like that!"

His idea was shot down without hesitation. If it was the feigning Ami, then he was sure she would have laughed and accepted.

"…Come on. Wearing a trashbag can't be that bad."

"No, absolutely no way. I'm not going to do such a thing! Geez…Unbelievable…"

In a spoiled and nasally voice, Ami turned away suddenly like a rude child.

Almost definitely, the usual Ami wouldn't have shown her displeasure like that. Just maybe, the guise

that had broken once before had become more easily susceptible to being cracked again on occasion. Like for example, when her whole body was thoroughly chilled because of a sudden downpour or something.

"…This has got to be a curse from those tadpoles."

Trying to alleviate the oppressive silence, he ended up saying something pointless. Ami despondently looked up at Ryūji,

"…Why did I have to be cursed?"

"It's probably their wrath from having their lives in peril."

"…I thought you rescued them, Takasu-kun."

"…The truth is, I just pretended to save them, but instead I actually tossed them into the grass over there…"

"Eh?!"

Looking greatly taken aback, Ami let loose such an exclamation of surprise. Her mouth was partially agape in shock, and her eyes remained wide open looking as if they might spill out,

"…Couldn't you tell that was a joke? Do I look like the kind of guy who could do something like that?"

"Wh…what's with that! Geez! For a second you really scared me, because Takasu-kun, you really do seem like a guy who might do that sort of thing!"

She said something kind of rude there.

"Just what do you mean? Sorry for making you think that, but I'm quite a nice guy. Although it's just me saying that about myself…but seriously, I really love animals; I even own and take excellent care of a parrot that I hatched from an egg."

"A parrot?...Is that the one that Taiga Aisaka was calling an ugly weird parrot?"

"That Taiga, how could she say such a thing…he's a good parrot with his own sort of charm."

"So parrots can be good or bad? What's his name?"

"Inko-chan."

"…"

Ami was silent for only a moment---

"Ahahaha! What the heck!"

She broke out in laughter. She pointed at Ryūji, who sharply narrowed his gaze in confusion not getting what she meant,

"That's so unusual, a name like that! It's not even a name really, it's just the species type, you know! Weird, weird, weird, to~tally weird!"

"…Really?"

"Really!"

Brushing aside her dripping hair, she revealed her curved brow. As she lightly clapped, Ami just kept laughing all the more. She must have found the whole thing terribly funny, so much so that she was beating the ground with her feet,

"Inko-chan, you said! What the heck! Takasu-kun, you 're so different from how you look, though not as much as that student president~!"

Facing Ryūji, she was laughing so hard that the corners of her eyes started filling with tears. But then,

"---~"

Ami's laughter ended as abruptly as it had started. It was just like she had been hit with a petrification spell. Ami's stony gaze was directed past Ryūji to somewhere behind him, and her expression had become just like a stone statue. Then,

"What's wrong?...Wait, hey! Kawashima!"

Without responding to Ryūji at all, Ami took off out from the shelter and into the drizzling rain. Ryūji couldn' t keep up with her behavior that didn't really seem to make any sense. Bending down as if to hide herself amidst the overgrown grass as she sort of jogged, she got steadily further and further away from him while being pelted by the cold rain. He didn't understand what was going on, but as there was no reason not to follow her,

"Wait up!"

Ryūji also jumped out into the steady rain. Then after catching up to her, he was forced to get right behind her as they huddled into the abandoned and run-down bicycle storage area that was a little bit apart from the arbor shelter.

Even though they were now covered by a corrugated iron roof, in comparison to the arbor shelter from just before it was like heaven and earth. It was just as exposed to the wind but without anywhere to sit, and there were rusted bicycles piled up nearby in a disorderly heap.

"What the heck's the matter?! Why did we come all the way over to this wet place…?"

"Sh!"

"…~!"

Her cold hands reached out and around the back of Ryūji's neck. With the coldness and the scent coming from Ami at such close range, Ryūji couldn't speak or even breathe.

Applying her full body weight, Ami was holding onto Ryūji tightly. Roughly pulling him down with considerable force like that, she made him crouch down on the spot.

"O…, wa…,…~"

"…Sh, I said!"

In close contact, her body was strangely supple yet so slender it was like she barely existed, and Ami's skin was so soft that it felt as if the portion that clung to him was melting thoroughly together.

He couldn't let such a thing happen…Ryūji was seriously desperate, and while his face was completely flushed blood-red, he grasped a pillar trying to resist Ami's weight and pull away. The smell of being wet with rain was sweet, and looking up dazedly like a drowned man, Ryūji exhaled towards the sky.

However,

"…Just for a little while…let's hide here like this…"

She just barely spoke in a whisper.

Then Ami balled up even more tightly, and using Ryūji's body like a shield, she situated herself against him snugly. From a point-blank distance, her shut eyelids were pearl gray and the clear raindrops on her long wet eyelashes seemed to glitter.

"A, ah, ah…Wa, wai…T, this is…"

With an expression that looked as if he had been pricked and was gushing blood, Ryūji stammered, embarrassedly overwhelmed. If such a guy existed who could remain normal when faced with this sort of incredibly sudden contact with such an incredibly pretty girl, Ryūji would like to meet him.

"…Over there…"

Whispering just barely, Ami discreetly pointed with her finger. While still in a daze, he looked over that way at that moment. Ryūji's boiling blood instantly chilled and coldly pooled at his feet.

"…T, that guy…"

The man who ran into the arbor shelter they had just come from to avoid the rain brought back an unwelcome memory.

Closing his umbrella and looking about, he looked like a normal college student at first glance---If he wasn't holding a digital camera while in this downpour, then he probably wouldn't stand out so much.

Instinctively breaking out in goosebumps, Ryūji stood in place of Ami as he tried to completely hide her with himself somehow.

"The weirdo from yesterday…it's him. What's he doing in a place like this? If it's a coincidence, then that's just too much…"

"…Do you really think it's a coincidence?"

"…"

He couldn't reply to her. Because there was no way it was a coincidence.

"He must have come to ambush us at school…"

Feeling a bit creeped out, Ryūji shivered slightly without thinking---It wasn't just because of the cold.

"How does he know what school you attend? Yesterday, didn't you say something like he was just a weird fan who you met coincidentally?"

"…Yeah, I did but…"

He felt a bitter hesitation mixed into Ami's faltering voice. She opened her mouth a number of times but would close it each time, and she was holding her breath while in his arms. She stiffened up like that.

"Go ahead and say it. We've already come this far, there's no need to hide anything."

When he gently shook her chilled shoulders, her back trembled just a bit. Then Ami slowly started speaking,

"Well, that is…to put it bluntly, he's, a stalker…I guess ."

In a low voice, she finally spit it out.

After she said it, Ryūji remembered hearing Ami shout the same word before---'You, stalker!'. During her

furious confrontation with Taiga, that had been perhaps the only time that Ami had revealed her emotion.

"How should I say this…Yesterday, I was embarrassed so I couldn't say it. I really didn't want to blow things out of proportion…That guy, he's a well-known troublemaker in the industry. I don't know how he gets his information, but he often shows up holding his camera, at people's homes, at their schools, and so on. I don't know how many people have been targeted besides myself, but he has been prowling around causing trouble for many of the other magazine models as well."

"…Seriously…?"

Ami nodded at Ryūji's groaning voice then resumed talking.

"The reason I moved here is also the fault of that guy. My mom, she's also a performer you know. We were told by her office that there was a weird man prowling around our house's neighborhood…I was the only one to be put into the care of our relatives at their house. Dad's also busy with work so he couldn't leave his office in the city. But…where I moved to must have been discovered …"

"Is, is that how it was…?"

"Yeah. I thought there was no choice but to move, but even so…It's scary. I'm separated from my friends, I have to take a break from modeling until things cool down, and even the office had to take a temporary break. So, there's no one to watch out for me…Before, I had a manager, so he would take me back and forth by car… Ah man, I can't believe this…Even after I went to the trouble to move here, that guy followed me…"

That must be scary.

Ryūji was scared enough to feel chilled even though he was a guy, so for Ami, who was the actual target, the fear must have been beyond his comprehension.

He unconsciously held her a bit tighter,

"…Takasu-kun…"

"We'll keep hiding until that guy gives up and leaves."

He was a timid guy who couldn't say something like " I'm going to beat him to a pulp", but if it was just keeping her hidden, even Ryūji could do it. So like that, the two of them breathed quietly, staying together as

they waited for time to pass. But, perhaps waiting for the rain to stop, the man just sat on the bench and began to casually wipe down his wet camera.

The whole time, the relentless rain continued to be carried by the wind and Ryūji's jersey was becoming drenched and heavy. He was wondering just how long they could last like that when,

"He~y! Takasu-ku~n! Kawashima-sa~n! How strange, we can't find them anywhere. But with this rain…hmm. Taiga, are you cold?"

"I'm ok. How about Minorin?"

"Fine fine! But, they've got to be somewhere. I saw them heading over to the river bank…"

"Maybe because of the rain, they might have turned around midway. Let's try going back."

"But if they turned around, wouldn't we have met them on the way?"

Amidst the rain that just might have gotten even stronger, he heard the unmistakable voices of Minori and Taiga. Not sure if they offered salvation or would just

make things worse, he couldn't really rely on just that pair whose actions he wasn't able to read. Even so, Ryūji unthinkingly moved to wave at them,

"Hey, those voices, they definitely belong to Taiga and Kushi…Buh!"

He almost burst into laughter. Even considering the current situation.

Because it was too much---Like he had suggested to Ami before, Minori was cheerfully wearing a trashbag with a hole cut in it as a transparent poncho. And then resting on top of Taiga's head was some sort of small clear container that she was using as a makeshift umbrella,

"By the way Minorin, about the takoyaki from just before, it wasn't really hot enough. It's already too late, but it really bugged me. I guess I'm just complaining for future reference."

So it was actually a takoyaki container…and yet even with such a thing, her small body was being quite well protected from the rain. He wondered if wearing aonori or katsuobushi on her head would work too. Really, that fellow was just too ridiculous…It was no good, his

abdomen hurt with the need to laugh…His nervousness had been put on hold.

Looking at his face as he was trying desperately to hold back his laughter,

"…Takasu-kun, for some reason you're shaking."

Ami's lips stiffened sharply as if accusing him. However,

"Sorry…just that…It's too funny…a takoyaki container umbrella…Buha!"

With the impression he got, he ended up thinking of Taiga as a monster---The image was being thoroughly fleshed out in his mind.

However, it seemed like it wasn't only Ryūji who was stimulated by her odd appearance. She caught the attention of the male stalker who was within the arbor shelter,

"Found a cute minisized monster!"

He rudely got his camera ready. However, there was no reason that the queen of beasts, the Palmtop Tiger, wouldn't notice such a movement.

"…Monster,…huh?"

In an instant, Taiga contorted her face, baring her fangs as if out for blood. She quite accurately turned to glare viciously at the arbor shelter from which the voice had emanated.

"You there! I don't know what you think you're doing, but you're way too creepy! I'm not going to just forget being called a monster by a suspicious looking person like you!"

She licked her lips once with her red tongue---Taiga's killing intent that she pulled out whenever she wanted, which would probably be completely unexpected by strangers including this weirdo, was about to burst.

Taking the takoyaki container she had been wearing into her hands and rolling it up, she finished preparing her makeshift weapon. Then firmly taking it with both hands, she held it tightly at her side,

"With this rain, there won't even be any evidence left behind."

At the same time that she practically spit out that mutterance, she violently charged forward.

"Eh? Wa, uwa!"

With Taiga not saying anything, firmly grasping her swordlike weapon, moving with remarkable speed, making a face like a hannya mask, and charging forward full of killing intent, it wasn't all that wrong to call her a scary monster.

"Wh, what the heck is this?!"

The man grabbed his bag in confusion and hurriedly lifted his umbrella before turning his back on Taiga and making a run for it. Taiga was just about to begin the hunt when,

"Who are you, you creep…Wah!"

She slid into the mud. It happened right in front of the dilapidated structure where Ryūji and Ami were hiding. Taiga was just on the verge of falling flat on her face into the mud,

"…Y, you…"

Ryūji jumped out with impeccable timing to just barely catch her by the nape of her neck, and amidst the rain, they froze in that pose looking like he had just caught a wild animal.

"You klutz!"

While they remained stiff in that stance,

"…I, I thought I already fell completely, so I was holding my breath!"

With Taiga's expectedly wet hair hanging down to her hips, she was clinging to Ryūji's arm as she desperately tried to regain her footing. Making an expression like that of a cat just hit by a car, she breathed a drawn-out sigh.

"Don't go around chasing people you don't know! And let's throw this away! Come on!"

Ryūji knocked the makeshift sword/ monster umbrella from her hand,…For some reason, it seemed like the back of her head smelled of katsuobushi. While

he was unconsciously staring at the top of Taiga's head, Minori caught up to them,

"What the heck were you doing, Taiga?! Or more like, who the heck was that man?! Or rather, where the heck have you been, Takasu-kun?!"

With question marks plastering her face, Minori wiped Taiga's mud-splattered face. When Ami showed up there similarly drenched,

"…Or should I ask, where were you at, Kawashima-san?!"

Looking surprised when she turned around, Minori plucked off shreds of grass that clung to Ami's shoulder.

"…~"

A single tear that showed through on Ami's rain-drenched face rolled down her cheek.

* * *

"A stalker?!"

Readjusting his glasses that had slid down the moment he yelled,

"…You didn't say even a word about this before. You just said you were tired of modeling, you didn't like your school, and you couldn't go back to your house or your parents…"

"It was hard to say. That is, if I had said something, Yūsaku would have been worried."

Looking at the face of his childhood friend who had matured so prettily, Kitamura was at a rare loss for words.

Calling it a token of gratitude for helping out in the cleanup and reparations for getting drenched in the downpour, Kitamura had invited them all to a fastfood shop that evening. Perhaps due to the earlier worsening of the weather, even though it was only gently raining now, there really weren't any other customers in the shop.

Ami finished telling Kitamura of her overly melancholic situation before turning her fair face downwards kind of pitiably. Ryūji was just watching for the time being, remaining relatively silent nearby. Minori was facing Ami with a worried look and a wrinkle in her brow, while Taiga---

"…Ah…"

Perhaps unable to overcome her nervousness at being in the same place as Kitamura, some ketchup spilled from the French fry she was holding. Ryūji didn't say anything as he pulled out one of the wet wipes that he carried with him to deal with Taiga's mishaps and deftly wiped her skirt.

It became just about silent at the rarely used round table where they were sitting.

"---Anyway."

The one to try jumpstarting the conversation was Kitamura.

"Anyway, we should try the police and…"

"I already said I've tried contacting them…It seems like there are even some of the others at the office who have tried to file reports, but he doesn't leave behind any evidence, like clues to his identity or anything…For something like this, the police won't do a serious investigation…"

"Well then, I'll catch him myself and hand him over to the police. He's been prowling around your neighborhood, right? I can talk to the members at your workplace for details, ask for some help,"

"Just stop there, that's too dangerous. And besides, something like that…If it gets out of hand, it'll just be troubling. You understand, right? This kind of problem will blow over eventually; just becoming a so-called ' victim' is already enough damage. If in addition to that, something were to unexpectedly happen to Yūsaku or anyone else, I wouldn't be able to handle that responsibility, and anyway my mom…I don't think my mom's office would allow it."

Being told all that, the man trying to uphold justice had to fall silent, but then nodding lightly to himself, he ended up crossing his arms.

"…But, if it's like this…"

"Mm! I've got it!"

The one raising her index finger and suddenly speaking up was Minori. Widening her eyes largely, she started saying the following.

"The reason that the police can't catch this guy is because they don't know his identity, right? If that's the case, then let's turn this around and go stalk him. Then we can take pictures and video as proof that he's following and stalking Kawashima-san. We hand that over to the police, then they can figure out who he is and catch him. That should do nicely, right?"

"Kushieda…! That's it! Wonderful! As expected from the head of the girls' division! Actually, right now, I wouldn't even mind handing over the boys' division to you!"

"Right, right?! Hand it over! We'll remodel their bodies and turn them into girls, then it'll be the all girls' division~!"

"Ahaha, you're seriously a crazy one~!"

Joking playfully, Kitamura and Minori were holding hands and acting excited, but Ryūji couldn't help but cut it short…No, it's not like he wanted to join in as well.

"Wait, wait. What you just said, who's going to do it?"

"Can't I just do it?"

Unpretentiously, Minori captivated Ryūji with her dazzling smile as she said that.

"A friend in need is a friend indeed! So I'm going to help as much as I can."

Going "Yay!", she struck a peace sign---Truly, Minori was a kind-hearted goddess descended to earth. He had to hold his mouth and his eyes shone almost crazily as Ryūji was moved by the extent of her kindness. It wasn't that he had gone over the edge, just that he had gotten a little teary-eyed.

"I, I'll also do what little I can."

He didn't have any confidence in his physical strength, but for him to do nothing after the girl he liked had said

so much, it would be unforgivable for him as a man to do such a despicable thing. Then, he flicked a glance over at Taiga, whose presence was practically nonexistent.

He was faced with Baron Ashura.

…Ryūji couldn't be certain, but he could guess what she was feeling. The grimace on her right half was jealousy towards Ami who was being worried about by Kitamura. The excited look on the left half of her face was hope at the prospect of just maybe getting to do something together with Kitamura. The complicated gloom that permeated her whole face was concern for Minori who was declaring her intent to help and also just maybe…a minor possibility, there might have even been some real concern for Ami in there, like a little pinch of spice…Or at least that's what he wanted to think.

"Hey, Taiga."

Anyway, it seemed like Taiga would just remain as she was, completely petrified, if he didn't intercede.

"Of course you'll be helping out, right? You must have a grudge against that guy. I mean, didn't he say that? He called you that…"

"…He did say it. He called me a monster."

Without mentioning the fact that he had been thinking the same thing, Ryūji nodded deeply.

"Then, you have to take him down."

Keeping silent for the moment, Taiga's glance that was directed at Ryūji had already become cleansed of any traces of anger or concern at such a trivial matter.

"…That's right…You're right…Yeah, I'll do it. I really can't stand you, but in this case, we have a common enemy."

Taiga was facing Ami as she gave a single definite nod.

"For now, we're all in this together!"

Getting fired up, Taiga had the kind of tension usually involved with starting a speech while facing Kitamura,---however, Ami was making a face that looked steeped in depression, biting her lip without speaking. Noticing this ,

"Are you okay?"

Ryūji instinctively asked her, causing Ami to suddenly look up. She quickly put on a smile,

"…Eh, yeah! As long as you're all going to help me, I'm totally great. I'm seriously thankful, you're all so dependable!"

Her strangely light words resounded dully within the empty shop.

Chapter 6

"The captain with the fearsome pitching arm, Kushieda Minori!"

"Yeah! The 'Bullet Home Return' that dominated the Kantou region isn't just for show!"

"The proficient cook with the mean expression, Takasu Ryūji!"

"Y, yeah…I can only stick around until 5 o'clock; there's a limited time offer on chicken today."

"The one with the strongest name is here to help, Aisaka Taiga!"

"…"

"---And last is me, Kitamura Yūsaku! All members present and accounted for!"

Turning around and pointing, Kitamura checked off on each one of them then tightly clenched his fist. Even the ordinarily busy Kitamura was taking a break from

club activities today, and it seemed he had even gotten special permission to put his student council duties on hold.

It was 4 o'clock in the afternoon and there were no other students left in the classroom. The fading sunlight illuminated the three people sitting around Kitamura like underlings and Ami, who was standing a little bit apart from them.

"Now then", Kitamura put on a chairman-like appearance as he began speaking in his far carrying voice .

"Starting immediately, we're going to implement the strategy we laid out yesterday. So Kushieda, Aisaka, and I will be in charge of photographing the stalker. We'll be using this digital camera, and just in case, we're each going to take some shots with our cell phones as well. Just in case, Takasu will be sticking around Ami."

Raising his hand, Ryūji requested Kitamura's permission before speaking.

"…Wouldn't it be better if you and I took the pictures while the two girls followed Kawashima around?"

Taiga aside, he felt that the way they had it set up would be too dangerous for Minori. However, Kitamura just overturned Ryūji's suggestion,

"Not really, because if something were to happen and we get scattered while taking pictures, it would be pretty bad to just leave the girls all by themselves. If we're discovered while we're doing this kind of thing, it's possible that things will get out of hand. In the unlikely event that something does happen, you'll be there to protect Ami with your fearsome looks."

"…I kind of understand, but…I seriously don't have any confidence when it comes to fighting."

Looking at his fists that had never been directed against another person in his whole life, Ryūji mumbled rather pitifully. However, Ami had moved over next to him and wrapped one of his arms with both of her hands

"It'll be fine! If it's Takasu-kun, I really feel I can depend on you! Because I believe that you'll definitely protect me!"

"Um…Ah…Eh?!"

Surprised by her sudden approach, Ryūji couldn't even speak. He wasn't sure how he should get away. Trying to pull at his gently ensnared arm and squirming uncomfortably already felt indecent enough that he ended up blushing. It actually made Taiga's chillingly piercing stare practically comfortable.

"All right. Then we're starting. We have no idea where we're being watched, so once we pass the shoeracks, Takasu and Ami will go first. We'll take the route we discussed yesterday, and we'll keep in contact via cell phone."

On Kitamura's command, they left the classroom one after the other and started walking down the hallway. Then,

"…You, just what is that?"

Ryūji ended up spotting something strange in Taiga's collar as she walked in front of him.

"I'm just bringing it as a precaution…It feels so nostalgic, carrying this guy around."

While Taiga's lips curled, just a glimpse of something that looked like a wooden stick peeked out through gaps in her hair. Thinking 'What in the world is it?', he tried pulling it out just a little for a better look,

"…If you go around waving this thing, it's going to become a big deal."

"I get it, that's why I said it's just a precaution."

He gently thrust the handle of the wooden sword that he had accidentally seen back into her jacket collar. Ahh, how nostalgic---that night in spring, he had been nearly killed by that guy…If he looked really closely, he could figure out that there was definitely something at Taiga's exceptionally well-postured back. It just wasn't all that noticeable because her back was concealed by her long hair.

"…More important than that, Ryūji..."

Oddly, Taiga had lowered her voice and was staring at him with large eyes. She was still keeping that wooden sword hidden behind her back.

"Hm?"

"You're really a helplessly perverted dog, aren't you… Just now, making that lovesick face…You're so unfaithful, I'm ashamed as your master, seriously."

"Wh,…What are you talking about…?"

Even though he asked her what she was going on about, he was of course fully aware of what she meant. Taiga just let out a big sigh at Ryūji's face.

"You're really getting friendly with Kawashima Ami… Well, isn't that nice? You're just quickly abandoning Minorin and latching onto some pretty girl who treats you nicely. So you're that kind of guy. I'll keep that in mind."

"That, you…Y, you're misunderstanding something."

"I wonder about that. Well, it's your life. I'm not going to concern myself with your problem with lust."

"…Just what the heck are you saying?"

Going 'fu', she finally gave a malicious smile. She turned away, full of contempt, before trotting off to leave Ryūji behind and, with her long and smoke-like hair

swaying, she moved to cling tightly to Minori who was walking a little ahead.

"Hey, if it isn't Taiga-chan. You're so cute today as well."

While Taiga was practically purring and sidling up to her, Minori was touching the tip of the wooden sword, which was just barely hidden by the hem of Taiga's skirt, in a way that made it look like she was groping Taiga from behind,

"You're carrying something pretty hard, aren't you?"

"Can't be too prepared."

…Ryūji unthinkingly stared, no...rather, he was put off . Even though Taiga was always calling him a perverted dog, weren't they the ones being much more perverted?

Furthermore, Taiga was being rather mean with her comments, even for her. What the heck had he done to deserve it? And then she'd run away before he got a chance to retort---

"Takasu-kun, is something the matter?"

"A…No, it's nothing."

Before he knew it, Ami had popped up beside him with her smiling face, and it was making him nervous. As they were walking side by side close enough that their shoulders could touch, his anger was slowly flowing away. Instead, he was starting to feel oddly impatient.

Anyway, the girl by the name of Kawashima Ami was suddenly excessively close to him---Reciting the reason why his face felt hot, Ryūji averted his gaze from Ami as he twisted his lips into an upside down V.

As they were leisurely walking about the immediate vicinity,

"…So then, I asked them to let me try on the light pink one. But the shop people, you know, they said the white would definitely suit Ami-chan, that only white would do, then they forced me to wear that knitted one. And then even I was like, maybe white is actually pretty good ? That's what I started feeling, but then when I thought

about the knitted one I bought the other day, I think it might have been white, mm, well actually it seemed a little more like light gray than white…Could it have been beige? Maybe it was beige?"

Ami just kept going on and on and on with her story about shopping while she smiled broadly. This was probably the so-called [cute and fashionable girl whose head is so occupied with shopping that she can't think about anything difficult] appearance.

"Takasu-kun, are you listening?"

"…Yeah."

"The white or the pink, which one would Takasu-kun choose?"

"…Well, me wearing pink is kind of …"

"That's not it! I'm talking about for me!"

"Is that so?"

Ahahahaha----hahaha, haha, ha…

Just then, Ryūji came to understand Kitamura's actual intentions. That fellow who had hopingly asked Taiga to become friends with Ami, there wasn't anything wrong with his glasses after all.

"I just love shopping for Western-styled clothing."

Perhaps she was trying to clear yesterday's events from her memory. Speaking childishly and a bit spoiled, Ami was showing off an angelic smile. However, rather than this present Ami, he felt the unaltered Ami who would exchange vicious glares with Taiga was much better. The Ami who tossed away her shoes that had been ridden with tadpoles onto the river bank while spouting curses was much easier to understand.

Dealing with the pretentious Ami was tedious and kind of chilling, so he ended up feeling like he was looking at something rather dangerous and unpredictable. Because it was a fake face.

Her pretense was just like thin ice---Having fallen through, her honest self must have been drowning in worry, so why would she hide it? Regardless of whether her personality was good or bad (well, it was probably bad), when he considered how she was trying to hide her

real self even after it had already been exposed, he ended up wondering why she would go to such lengths to do something so futile.

"Ah, your phone's ringing."

Ami's shell-like fingertip was pointing to his cellphone that had been vibrating in his pocket, possibly for some time. He hastily flipped it open,

"…Hello?"

'"Takasu! How's the situation over there?"'

He answered Kitamura's hotly spirited voice in a very mundane manner.

"No change. What about on your side?"

'"We found the guy right away. He's walking about fifteen meters behind you guys. We're keeping nearby and tracking him."'

"Takasu-kun, is that Yūsaku? Switch, switch!"

Ami extended her hand from the side and took the cellphone from Ryūji.

"Hello~, is this Yūsaku? Yeah, I'm fine, Takasu-kun is here, after all! Um, you know, I'm kind of tired of walking…Yeah, okay…Ah, really? Then we'll do just that!"

Deciding on her own to end the call, she flipped it closed,

"Yūsaku you know, he said to go into a shop. At some place that serves tea, sit at a window seat."

Ami spoke while smiling happily.

"Is there a shop like that near here? Take me there, please."

"A place that serves tea you say…It's nearby, can you see that sign just down the street?"

Even though he felt it would be hopelessly unbearable to go for tea at a café with Ami, he couldn't do anything about it if those were Kitamura's orders. Ryūji pointed out the round sign that was primarily decked out in green just a bit in front of them.

"Ah, if it isn't a Starbucks! So there was one around here, that's great, it's been a long time since I drank a latte!

"Does it really look like a Starbucks? That's a…"

"…Hm?...What?...Eh?"

As they got progressively closer, Ami's head became progressively tilted with suspicion. Certainly, the sign looked just like that of the North American coffee chain. The round shape, the green bordering, the somewhat indistinguishable humanoid image---

"Th, this is…"

---But that image was of the old man who owned the shop.

"Sudou Coffee Bar…We usually call it Sudoba…"

"…Geh…"

Ri~ng

Sounding the bell that would probably be considered uncommon nowadays, Ryūji and Ami walked into Sudoba. Nevertheless, he guessed the inside was designed to resemble the original Starbucks. The place was self-service with the college girl employees sitting on comfortable looking sofas. Yet it wasn't like the shop was all that empty.

"Ehh…Sudoba…It's got a pretty good atmosphere…"

Scanning the room, Ami was nodding while looking intrigued. Getting up from a seat by the window was a middle-aged man,

"Ohh! If it isn't Mirano-chan's kid!"

He called out to Ryūji familiarly. Heartbroken over his divorce this spring, Inage-san was a regular at Bishamonten Kuni.

"Ah, hello."

"Uwa~, what's this?! Today you brought along another pretty lady…Did you break up with that small scary girl? Come on, you broke up, didn't you? Well it's fine, a second marriage…Or rather, a new girlfriend…"

"That's not it, you've got it all wrong. Kawashima, go ahead and sit next to him since there's space. I'll go get some drinks."

"Ye~s."

"How cute~", "You're such a pretty girl~", "You kind of resemble that actress, Anna Kawashima~", "Yeah~", " You must get that often~"…Turning his back on their light-hearted banter, Ryūji went to the counter.

"Welcome to Sudobucks!"

Even the way the employed college girl (she was wearing a green apron over a black polo shirt) pronounced the shop's name was standardized. From the menu that was pretty normal considering they went so far to plagiarize, Ryūji ordered American coffee then returned to the seat where Ami was waiting.

"You're okay with coffee, right?"

"Yeah. This place just might be pretty comfortable…I almost feel like doing my homework."

With her body sinking into the sofa, it seemed like Ami had completely become Sudobucks' prisoner. That's right, that's right, everyone in this town loves Sudoba. It was clear that even if they were to wait a hundred years, an original Starbucks wasn't going to pop up around here.

"We can even get you some cake. It's handmade by my daughter."

"…Cake…Cake is…I really want to eat, but…"

Resisting temptation, Ami stubbornly shook her head back and forth. Perhaps unconsciously, her hands were on her stomach. He wondered if it was the result of Minori's pinch the other day. Without offering any further encouragement, Ryūji took out his cell and called Kitamura.

"Hey, Kawashima and I are at Sudoba now."

'"Ah, we confirmed your entrance, roger! Sudoba is quite a good shop."'

Yes yes, he nodded as a fellow local.

‘“That stalker guy is still following you, staring at the window. He’s hiding in the entrance of the building across from the intersection. Just sit tight for a little while .”’

“Understood.”

When he shut his phone, Ami immediately asked him about their conversation.

“So, what did Yūsaku say?”

“That man, he’s hiding by the building across from here. We’re supposed to wait here for a little while.”

“…Geh. Creepy…So he’s definitely watching us.”

Just as Ami started to hide herself behind the curtain, she immediately snapped back to her original posture, going “Ah, that’s right”.

“If I hide like this, there’s no point then, is there?”

“Right, right, if he doesn’t take some pictures then we won’t be able to get our shots either.”

“…I know, but…It’s unpleasant…creepy…”

Ami cast her eyes downwards while twisting her pretty face somewhat.

"Well, it really is kind of creepy. He's sneakily taking pictures of you for some unknown purpose."

"That much is true, but the really creepy stuff isn't limited to just that. Some time ago, that guy put some pictures he had taken secretly into our mailbox…That was seriously creepy."

"Y, your mailbox?! That means he went as far as your front door! That's…"

Waving her hand as if saying "No, that's not it" at the now speechless Ryūji, Ami scrunched her face in distress even more.

"That he could get to my house is unnerving of course, but the pictures themselves were just as much of a problem in my opinion. They were from when I was out shopping while on my way home from work, and well… I was making villain-like faces, that was my reaction. No matter how I looked at them, I had the face of a bully. Seeing that made me feel seriously sick…Like, this is really me?! Am I really this awful?! That's what I felt."

Ryūji was inadvertently thinking that it wasn't such a problem since she was beautiful after all.

"Horrible, it was seriously too despicable...That face. I really didn't like it. I hated it…I didn't want something like that to be seen."

It looked like Ami, who was speaking while contorting her lips as if spitting, sincerely couldn't allow such a thing. However, although it might be bad for Ryūji to say it, he wouldn't be outclassed when it came to that kind of a worry.

"If you're going to talk like that, then look, just look at me. Kawashima, when you first saw me, you must have been thinking 'delinquent,' right? It's not just that I look like I have a bad character, but strangers walking down the road even talk about me behind my back. You still have it easy, because in any case people call you cute and the like when they look at you."

"Well then, Takasu-kun can also try putting on a cute face."

"How would I do that?"

"Try this. While seriously believing 'I am cute~! So very cute~!', do this."

She brought both hands up to her face with her index fingers extended, narrowed her eyes with a gentle smile, and tilted her petite head prettily. Thinking to himself, ' Do it, don't regret it now', Ryūji tried to pump himself up,

"Like this?"

Following her example, he tried smiling.

"…Buh!"

Ami coughed up the coffee she had been in the middle of drinking. Looking distressed for a while, she continued to cough vigorously,

"…~,…Wh,…Geh…Ta…Taka…, cough, cough!"

"…I know exactly what you want to say. Actually, I already knew even beforehand."

Desperately holding her mouth with the handkerchief she had grabbed, Ami was on the verge of tears. Her face

had turned red from coughing, she was leaning against the table for support, and she seemed to be having trouble breathing, but she nevertheless was somehow able to point at Ryūji,

"S, scary…Cough…It's almost…a horror attraction!"

"Okay, I already said I knew that!"

Her reaction was pretty much what he expected, but still, he really felt hurt. He wasn't saying this because he was hurt, but,

"…I just want to tell you, but you were doing the same kind of thing, you know. You might have cute looks, but essentially, the way you act scary and almost horrifying is just about the same."

"Haa~, thought I was going to die! No way Takasu-kun, just how was that anything like me at all?!"

Kahaha…Considering how she laughed amusedly and called him 'that', he was unable to stop with only that much.

"It's the same. I don't want to say it, but when you changed all of a sudden yesterday, it was ten minutes of

horror. Not the part where Kawashima suddenly got angry, but afterwards, when you acted like you were perfectly fine."

As expected, he didn't mention that he knew about her true character from the first time they met, but---No, he might just have said too much already, but it was already too late to take everything back. Now that he had said this much, he wasn't going to stop until he had said everything he needed to say.

"You should cut the act. Everything will quickly be exposed. I don't know if you think that act you put on is cute or something, but if you were to see it, it's not something you'd feel good about."

He ended up going that far in his speech,

"…Kawashima…?"

He had said too much after all, probably---He finally looked at Ami's expression.

Ami remained smiling,…with an artificial, angelically gentle smile, she was staring at Ryūji. Without showing any signs of emotional instability, she was forcing her whole face into a smile.

"Is this about yesterday? What?---That stuff you're saying, it's as simple as breathing for me. I'm not going to back down if it's just this, you know?"

Ryūji wasn't even sure whether the look she was directing straight at him was cold or hot. There was only one thing he was sure of: no matter what he tried to say or what words he used, nothing would reach this girl past her iron mask.

"You know, I can't get along without this face. I know that myself the best."

"U…mm…"

He didn't know how to respond. However, it didn't look like Ami was really expecting any sort of response. She continued speaking while still smiling.

"Whether or not there's any meaning or value, that kind of thing and how things are remain two separate matters. I'm pretty sure there wasn't any yesterday. No meaning or value. What happened was…Maybe I was just feeling negative because of that annoying midget? That midget's face when she's sticking near Takasu-kun, it's too amusing. The only reason I mention it is because

it makes me want to act recklessly like that…The tadpoles were outside my expectations though."

"…Sorry, I kind of…I don't really understand, but… Did I say too much?"

"Hmm? What are you talking about? Was Takasu-kun speaking to me about something? I don't remember, not~ at~ all."

As Ami's eyes turned wide as if she was mystified, Ryūji held his breath for a bit. She was going to stubbornly continue hiding her real self, this girl.

"Come on, what's with that face? You don't need to think so hard. This, you know, it's strategy. It's a strategy where saying weird things makes people think about me …There's really no meaning in it."

"…Seriously, I just don't get you."

When Ryūji said that, Ami cutely tilted her head and laughed some more as if satisfied.

"Fine fine, it's okay if you don't. Come on, I'm an airhead after all."

If it's fine not to understand…If that's the case, then he seriously wouldn't think about it anymore. Ryūji shrugged and looking at the two-sided self-proclaimed airhead, he pretended to drink his coffee.

Eventually, he estimated at least ten minutes must have passed without them really having a conversation. Ryūji's cell phone shook in vibrating mode.

'"Hello, Takasu? We've got a bit of a problem. It looks like that guy wasn't able to take any good pictures of Ami from where he was, so he gave up and started reading manga while waiting for you guys to leave the shop. It was no good having you guys go in there; could you go ahead and leave?"'

"Yeah, understood."

Explaining the situation to Ami, they quickly put away their trays before leaving Sudoba. It seemed like Kitamura and the others had confirmed their exit from somewhere nearby.

'"Sorry. So just like we originally planned, travel northwest along the highway and head to the park."'

"Roger…Kawashima, let's walk this way."

Side by side with Ami, Ryūji was just about to start casually walking again,

'"Also---I have one more unfortunate thing to report. We've lost Kushieda."'

"…Wha?!"

He instinctively stopped walking.

The one who thought this up? All ready? She left before they even did anything?

After Ryūji unthinkingly yelled out in surprise, Ami looked at him with her eyes widened…No good, if he didn't pretend things were okay, the stalker guy might become suspicious.

"Wh,…why?"

'"She got a message from her work about an emergency, someone got a cold and they needed help. She might have been in danger of being fired because the guy who hired her was crying that if Kushieda didn't come, it would be his neck, so while the guy was crying, she left the battlefield…Kushieda said, let's meet again,

and also that she was really sorry…We lost such a good soldier…”’

Ryūji gulpingly held his breath. Minori had left the front lines, so then in other words that meant,

“…T, then, right now, it’s just you and Taiga by yourselves…”

‘“Aisaka is doing fine.”’

“Le, let me speak with Taiga for a moment, it’s an emergency!”

A second later,

‘“…~”’

Breathing that seemed to be on the verge of tears without saying anything was flooding the phone. It was Taiga.

“Ta, Taiga…Are you okay?!”

‘“…U…Uh.”’

She didn't seem okay---Ryūji violently scratched his head. To be all alone with Kitamura, that wasn't a situation that Taiga could handle right now. Even though she would normally just end up petrified from being nearby, now they were walking together alone…He wouldn't be surprised if Taiga was on the verge of death.

"Hey, pull yourself together! Are you guys talking?! Is there a problem?!"

'"…I'm,…I'm,"'

"You…feel alright?!"

'"I'm nervou,"'

Suddenly the call got cut short.

"Eh…Ehh?!"

Thinking "What the heck", Ryūji just looked blankly at his phone. Clumsy in even normal situations, Taiga was alone with Kitamura too nervous to even speak, and then while they're following the stalker, the phone suddenly cuts out…His worry, it was infinite.

"Hey, what's wrong? Wasn't that Yūsaku and the others just now? Bad reception?"

"Y, yeah…For some reason it just cut out all of a sudden…"

"Why don't you try calling back from over here?"

Nodding at Ami's reasonable advice, he tried calling back, but all he heard was, "The phone you are trying to reach is currently not available…". He tried once more with no change, so with a sigh he put the phone into his pocket.

"Can't get through? To Yūsaku and the others?"

"A, anyway, Kushieda left, and it seems like Taiga's not doing so well…What the heck's going on, seriously… Maybe I'll try calling again. No wait, maybe we're still out of range for reception…"

He noticed Ami suddenly stare up at him.

"…Wh, what?"

Ami didn't say a word.

Different from the look of fearing the stalking man, it was more like a gaze that was trying to search Ryūji's inner self. Such a clear yet thoroughly serene look made it hard for him to remain calm---

"Wh, what is it?"

"…Nothing special…"

With a breath and a faint smile, she relinquished him from that stare. He felt like he had been saved.

"It's just that I was thinking. Takasu-kun, you really seem quite kind. Especially when it comes to that kid."

Before he could ask her who she meant by that kid, his phone vibrated in his pocket. It looked like they had finally gotten some reception as he pressed the talk button,

"Hey."

'"Uh~…Uh~…"'

"…Ta, Taiga?!"

He instinctively pressed the phone against his ear with all his might. Wondering just what happened on the other end of the line, he could hear Taiga's sobbing voice.

"Hey, what's wrong?!"

'"Ki, Kitamura has…~"'

"Did something happen to Kitamura?!"

At those words, Ami instantly turned to look up at Ryūji's face.

'"Kitamura fell into a ditch!"'

"D,…A ditch?!"

'"Just now, we were shaken off at a crosswalk, and then when he ran hastily to catch up, he ended up falling into a ditch in the gutter…Kitamura got all messed up and he said to leave him behind…!"'

"Huh?!"

‘“And, and then, I was told to go find a good spot and he made me take the digital camera…~…Now, I’m all alone…!”’

While Ryūji was thinking this was ridiculous, he could hear on the other end just faintly…Aisaka~, be careful~…That faraway voice definitely belonged to Kitamura.

‘“…Ooh, just what the heck am I doing this sort of thing for, I don’t even know…”’

“D, don’t cry! Umm, that’s right…Y, yeah…Anyway, ummm.”

‘“Ah!”’

“What happened?!”

Halting his steps reflexively, he held his breath. Just now, Taiga had screamed.

‘“…Oh,…There was a sign…”’

Hearing her calm voice, he started to relax for the moment thinking everything was okay, but,

‘“I fell into a ditch too. Today is just, horrible…My whole body’s messy, the camera’s messy too…The plan’s a failure, I’m ending the transmission.”’

“Eh…Ehh?! Taiga?! Hey, Taiga!...She, she hung up…”

---What the heck?

Ryūji was struck speechless, just staring at the phone after the call had ended. Just what did she mean by a ditch? Were there even any around? Was it that easy to fall into one? A ditch, she said…A ditch…

“What’s wrong with Yūsaku and the others?! Did something happen?!"

Even if he didn’t really get it, he had to try explaining it to her nevertheless. Resolutely, Ryūji turned to Ami who was looking up at him worriedly.

“…They were annihilated. Kitamura and Taiga both fell into a ditch.”

“…Huh? A, a ditch?”

They stood there blankly looking at one another. It hadn’t even been an hour since they started and now the

two who were remaining didn't have any place to go anymore. '

"…"

Ami's shoulders trembled. At almost the exact same time, Ryūji reflexively turned around.

The stalker guy who had shaken off Kitamura and Taiga was standing only a few meters away. He most likely hadn't even considered the possibility that he had been marked earlier; his face looked calm as he held a cell phone in one hand, and he was making a face like he was just going through his mail---But the camera flash indicator on his phone continued to glow. He was probably taking video.

"L, let's go…"

Furrowing her brow, Ami dropped her earlier expression and started moving forward swiftly. Somewhat confused, Ryūji also started running with her, naively thinking that just maybe they wouldn't be followed, but,

"Wa…~, what the heck, this guy…"

Unabashedly, that man was running after them while holding up his cell phone camera.

Since there weren't any other people around, that guy probably thought that if it was just Ryūji, even if something were to happen he could handle it.

While they were running, Ryūji started thinking. Why was it that in normal situations he was always considered terrifying, but now when he needed it, his glare was having no effect? Now he was even being treated lightly like this? When he tried looking over his shoulder, he got his answer. Dazedly, the man was looking at his phone's screen while probably only concerned with recording Ami, so he likely wrote off Ryūji as just some brat---That might have been true, but---That guy was looking down on him. If only he could have glared with the harsh eyes he had inherited from his father (a yakuza), maybe the situation could have improved.

"What do we do, he's still following us!"

At Ami's nearly hysteric voice, Ryūji's chest tightened. If they didn't deal with this somehow, then they wouldn't be able to return to a normal peaceful life.

"Umm…The closest policebox from here is…Ah, damn, he's right behind us! If we can just make it to a policebox!"

"Geez, enough…!"

Ami's pitiful voice trembled as she was on the verge of tears.

"Why do I have to go through all this?! It's all that guy 's fault things are so messed up! Yūsaku might have even gotten hurt…Geez, what are we supposed to do now?!"

If only it had been Kitamura who still remained, he probably would have charged right in and taken care of things. He was the kind of idiot who might fall into ditches, but his bravery and sense of justice were genuine . So he probably would have made sure not to allow a situation where a girl would cry like this---At least, if only that had been the case.

Ryūji at the very least tried to redouble his efforts, wanting to take Ami's hand as she ran. However, it seemed she was oblivious to his attempt as she ran desperately, and Ryūji couldn't even catch her balled up

hand. While he couldn't catch her and couldn't protect her, the trembling in Ami's voice continued to become more and more pronounced.

"Because of that insignificant creep, I went so far as to take a break from work, move, and transfer schools…! And yet, I still have to put up with the same stuff after all ! What the heck…If it's like this, then in the end I'm just running away again. No matter where I try to go, I'll just be chased down again…What the heck am I supposed to do?!"

"Ka, Kawashima!"

With her agitation steadily increasing, Ami's voice started getting louder, becoming shriller as if she was about to snap. Her voice that should have been trembling on the verge of tears seemed to suddenly be overtaken by anger.

"Hey, that guy can hear you!...If you get too excited…"

"That's just it, isn't it irritating?!"

Snarlingly, Ami's voice snapped.

"It's that creep's fault, that I'm irritated, that I'm stressed, and that I end up eating pastries and other things, you know?! And now I'm even flabby?! If it's like this, I might seriously have to quit modeling…What the heck's up with that?! Huh?! No way~! That's too much, isn't it?! But this fleshiness…This sort of…My stomach… is flabby?!"

Looking at her from the corner of his eye, Ryūji muffled a yelp and held his breath. Her expression that had been tearful until just recently had changed; her lips upturned, the blood vessels in her temple pulsed, both her eyes narrowed, her nose crinkled, and she bared her fangs like the Chihuahua she really was…Ami's real nature, the very thing itself.

"That brute…Damn it…Is Ami-chan going to lose to that detestable creep?!"

It appeared. Ami-chan appeared.

"For me, for Ami-chan to, lose, to that weirdo, and be, all messed up…! Ah~…Damn~…That brute~…How irritating~…Ami-chan is so pissed…"

"Ka, Kawashima…Hey, wait…"

"Takasu-kun, you said it before, right…To stop with the act, you told me that just a moment ago. I get it. I'll stop. Ami-chan will stop already. I'll stop, I'll stop, I, will , stop! I'll live with this bad-natured look."

"Wai, hey, that's…not what I…"

"Shut up! That midget, Taiga Aisaka didn't lose to that guy! Ami-chan isn't going to just keep on suffering this endlessly! Even if he's a guy, I'll teach him a lesson! As an actress's daughter---don't take me lightly!"

Next to the speechless Ryūji, Ami suddenly did an about-face. When he wondered about her turning around ,

"Uooooo~!"

Aiming at the man who was chasing after them, Ami went all out and started a fierce forward dash. With Ami brandishing her school bag in her hand and twisting her face to resemble that of a demon,

"Huh?! Ehh?!"

It wasn't surprising that the man would start to flee. The hunter and the hunted had switched roles all of a sudden,

"Stop right there, you---------~!"

Chasing after the man who was desperate to get away, Ami continued to heckle him heavily. Of course, Ryūji had no choice but to run after her,

"Idiot! Stop it! Calm down! I might look like this, but I seriously think fighting is wrong!"

However, it seemed like she was too far gone to hear anything Ryūji was saying. Seeing the man escape into the park,

"O~rya~!

She took a shortcut by jumping the shrubbery with a magnificent fawn-like leap and got ahead of him, and as the finisher,

"Take this!"

She flung her bag. The rectangular bag twirled in midair as it flew a short distance,

"Ugah!"

It hit the running man's legs. Dropping his bag, the man dove face first into the sandpit.

Ami immediately picked up the cellphone the man had dropped,

"…Haa…haa…haa…!"

Still looking like a demon while catching her breath, she didn't say anything, but there was a cracking sound as she started breaking the phone right in half.

"A, ahh…"

Filled with fear, the man pulled back as Ami threw the two remaining pieces onto the ground next to him. Then she continued,

"Haa…You still have it, don't you…Images of Ami-chan…Hand it over…The digital…camera…Hey! Hurry up and hand it over!"

"…It's, it's over there…"

The man trembled as he pointed to the contents of his bag that had spilled out all over the ground. There certainly was a latest model digital camera lying over there, and Ami stooped down and picked it up. Examining it for a while and trying out various buttons, Ami was probably trying to clear the data as she fiddled with it, but,

"S, stop it! You're going to break it!"

"…Haa…haa…"

The man who must have not fully considered the situation sounded like he was getting irritated. While breathing raggedly, Ami held the camera by the strap,

"Ei!"

Spinning it around and around, she finally used the momentum to slam the camera into a concrete bench.

"Waaaah!"

While the man's wail resounded, the camera was nevertheless state of the art, after all. It wouldn't break from just one or two collisions (well, Ryūji wondered if the insides were holding up), but,

"Ei! Ei! Ei!...Ya!"

Being cruelly bashed over and over, it finally made a clear cracking sound as Ami subjected it to treatment it shouldn't have to endure. But she just kept beating it like that any number of times,

"There! Take! That! I'll break it…Break…Shatter into pieces…I, will, destroy, itttt~!

---She had probably been building up a lot of stress. She continued to vandalize the camera repeatedly like that while holding onto the strap until it completely lost

any resemblance to an actual camera. Half buried in the sandpit, the man was silently crying. Faced with such a hellish scene, Ryūji didn't even know what to say.

"U~, u~, my camera is…"

"Now then…I wonder, what should I break next…? For some reason, Ami-chan's starting enjoy this? Ehh?"

Continuously stomping all over the remains of the wrecked digital camera with her feet, Ami cruelly smirked and laughed.

"Hey, can I break this? Is it all right if Ami-chan breaks everything? You listening? Why don't you answer? Should I break you too, just like this?"

"Please, please forgive me already!"

Kneeling in the sandpit, the man raised both of his trembling hands and clasped them together.

"…How about if I promise not to hang around Ami-chan anymore?"

"I've had it with the vows!"

Becoming unusually child-like, the man's tearful voice was echoing unsightly.

"After you've shown such a demon-like appearance, I'm already over and done with you. I don't consider Ami-chan my angel anymore! A liar, you're seriously a demon! You're completely black! You're such a fraud, and I don't want to have anything to do with you anymore! The cute angelic Ami-chan, there really never was anyone like that~! Ami-cha~n! Or rather I should say, why are you together with such a frightening delinquent, though I only just now noticed~?!"

"Are you talking about me when you say delinquent…?"

It seemed like, even more than having his cellphone or his camera broken, it was having his dream broken that was the most difficult thing to bear. Without putting up any sort of fight, he just kept speaking and crying shamefully.---Like for example, he wasn't the 'seriously' dangerous kind of fellow who would brandish a knife over his head, so Ami was really lucky for that. So then, the man's final words were as follows.

"You, your personality is horrible!"

"What are you talking about?"

With a cold reply, Ami pulled out a hand-mirror from her uniform's pocket as if she had just remembered. Then gazing at herself and smiling laughingly, she struck a cutesy pose.

"Ami-chan is just cute like this

. Personality or whatever doesn't matter

."

* * *

---She had maintained a show of strength while they left the park and as far as the first street corner.

"Come on, go ahead and sit! Right there, just move that newspaper!"

"…U…U…~"

After having practically dragged her along, he was trying to get Ami to sit on a cushion, but,

"My, my fingers won't let go~."

Ami spoke in a crying voice and looked up at Ryūji. Her fingers that were gripping Ryūji's arm had stiffened up, and now she seemed unable to remove them by herself.

"Ease up, it's fine if you do it slowly."

They were in the 2DK Takasu residence that was being gently lit by the setting sun. Sitting on the warm tatami mat, Ami desperately concentrated on calming her breathing while closing her eyes.

It was a good thing that they were able to break the stalker's fascination, but---They had been walking along the sidewalk when, as they turned the corner, Ami suddenly fell to her knees. She explained, "That…That was so scary!"

Her body had trembled and her eyes had become teary before her nervousness made her completely stiffen up, so she had to hold onto Ryūji as she walked since she couldn't even stand on her own. She was in a sorry condition that she couldn't handle alone, where even her parched lips had started to tremble.

Once they made it out of the park, the Takasu residence was nearby. So lending her his support, he had taken her to his house.

"Yasuko, that idiot, where did she go?"

Having made Ami sit down on the cushion in the living room and now standing in the kitchen, Ryūji looked troubled as he scanned the silent household. He seriously hadn't thought there would be no one around. If he had known that it would be this way, he would have called a taxi and sent Ami home. To bring a crying girl to his empty house, that kind of thing wasn't like Ryūji at all. Even if it was a girl who wasn't crying, it would probably still be impossible. Taiga? She was a special case.

Anyway, trying to calm Ami down, he put a little honey into some milk he had heated on the stove and brought it over to her.

"Th, thanks…"

"There's plenty more if you want seconds. If you don't like sweet things, then tea or coffee…Well, you just drank coffee a little while ago, didn't you?"

"…Don't worry, this is fine…"

Taking a sip, Ami finally gave one long sigh.

"It's delicious…Hey, can I add some more sugar?"

"I've only got honey, if that's okay."

She nodded, and he carefully poured some honey into the cup she was holding. As he was stirring the milk with a spoon, Ami's lips finally shifted into a faint smile.

"…How unexpected. Takasu-kun, do you drink this kind of stuff?"

"No, not really. But Taiga likes to drink this sort of thing."

After he accidentally said that, Ryūji noticed Ami was looking up at him.

"…Taiga. Takasu-kun, you always call Taiga Aisaka by her first name, don't you?"

"I just say it because it's too strange to act differently…"

It wasn't really an excuse; that is, there wasn't any reason to try and come up with an excuse---It was more of a preface.

"We happen to live next to one another, and she lives alone, and with just my mother and me, it's practically like living alone, so…Well, some way or another… Things like helping with chores…Eating meals together... It's kind of like we've become siblings…"

"…Fuu. Is that so?"

He wasn't sure if she really understood or not, but Ami didn't ask anymore about it,

"This is seriously tasty. I'll have to try this at my house next time."

Holding the cup of hot milk flavored with honey in both hands, she continued to take her time drinking it in small sips.

"How are you feeling?"

Simply swiveling her eyes upwards at his questioning voice, she shyly smiled while keeping the cup to her lips. Then, she suddenly turned off to the side,

"Ah man…I'm so embarrassed! Even after I had thoroughly decided! Or so I had thought at least…After all, I still ended up falling apart and trembling."

"I think that's only natural. You know, I, the moment you started running at him, I was pretty much trembling already. Seriously, you were really lucky that he didn't do anything violent."

"…Sorry."

Ami finally turned around and placed the now empty cup onto the dining table. Her face was tinted orange by light from the setting sun, and her light brown eyes were similarly turned a transparent amber.

"I can hardly believe it myself...It would have killed my mom if she found out about me doing something so risky. Just maybe, it might have been Taiga Aisaka's influence? Yesterday when we were at the river bank, I saw her easily chase away that stalker creep…So, I quickly became embarrassed about how I had been so frightened. Somehow…It kind of felt like I was losing to her or something…"

"…Taiga's not really what I would call normal, so I don't think you should be using her as your standard."

"The Palmtop Tiger. Right? I heard from Maya-chan and the others…Fufu, it's too perfect, that name. Maybe if I compete with the Palmtop Tiger, even I could strengthen myself a bit."

"…Kawashima, you're already a tough enough girl to begin with."

"Me, tough? Haha, I'm just twisted. I'll even say it myself, but Ami-chan is a seriously twisted person, black to the core, an ill-mannered girl---Takasu-kun probably also thinks so, after yesterday…Maybe even earlier than that. I probably can't change your opinion anymore anyway."

Shrugging her shoulders, Ami smiled, but it wasn't the same as the façade she would usually wear. Her eyes were lively with a hint of arrogance, her mouth had a slight twist that might have seemed cruel, and there was no trace of that angelic purity. Instead, she was sly and merciless, seeming really bad as her expression was

thoroughly embedded with a pride that didn't care about anyone, and yet,…it was beautiful. Just as strong as his desire to criticize her was a feeling of attraction---

"Ah…I had forgotten. About those two who had fallen into ditches."

"If Yūsaku's there, they'll be fine."

That's not necessarily true. But looking at Ami's expression, even after he had finally remembered about those two, his worry was slowly vanishing.

Her smiling face eventually began to stiffen, and Ami calmly held her breath. It seemed like she was dealing with an indistinct pain.

"…That girl, she's a good kid, isn't she?"

"By that girl…Do you mean Taiga?"

Without answering him, Ami hung her head.

"…Like with that stalker guy from just now…It's easy to become liked by a guy like that. Since I'm made out to

be cute in the pictures and on television, most people would come to like me…Because, come on, Ami-chan is super cute."

She said the last part jokingly, but Ryūji didn't feel like laughing. Seeing the stiffness of Ami's face as she stopped speaking, he just couldn't bring himself to laugh .

"…In the same way, it's just as easy to be hated. You say that the Ami-chan you guys normally see isn't really me,…that I should be my natural self. But if I do that, you'll all come to hate me."

Without thinking about it, Ryūji had turned away from her eyes that were full of self-derision. She looked pitiful and he couldn't bear to watch---if he were to tell her something like that, she'd probably feel even more hurt.

"…Come on, don't say such a thing."

"But it's true. It's like with that guy just now. It's difficult to like me when I'm being myself. That's all. So that girl…I'm jealous of Taiga Aisaka. She doesn't hide her feelings even a little. And despite her recklessness, Takasu-kun doesn't hate her at all. That's kind of,…no,

that's really vexing. Because I wanted to see her feeling vexed, I tried to steal Takasu-kun from her, but I totally wasn't able to do it. That was a first. Why was that? I wondered. Ami-chan is cuter, so why? How was Ami-chan not better? Isn't such a pattern impossible? Isn't it unacceptable? So like that…she's different from me? …I wondered…I guess I was feeling jealous of her."

Ryūji inconspicuously sighed.

So Ami was feeling jealous of Taiga like this. Taiga was jealous of Ami, to the point where she had even huddled down and sobbed all alone. They each coveted what the other one possessed. It was probably because they felt that way that they couldn't get along with one another. Their feelings would always be in conflict, so to have a kind and cuddly relationship like the one Taiga and Minori shared, such a thing would be absolutely impossible. There was really no helping that. Definitely.

However, there was only one thing that he wanted to say on behalf of Taiga. It was regarding the part that Taiga, who had been described as 'not hiding her feelings', hadn't made known to anyone besides Ryūji and was desperately trying to change.

"…Kawashima, you have Kitamura, don't you?"

"Yūsaku?"

"That guy, he really worries about you and treats you dearly. I'm sure he'd accept you for who you are; he even went so far as to fall into a ditch for you, after all."

"…You're right. But…Yūsaku is a no-go."

A bit of her hair shifted for that moment, hiding Ami's face from Ryūji.

"Yūsaku already has 'one girl he really likes' after all."

"…Eh?"

His thinking stopped.

Ryūji suddenly remembered who Kitamura had confessed to almost immediately after being admitted to the school---Taiga. However, Kitamura had clearly told Taiga that they should just remain friends. Regardless of whether or not Taiga accepted that, there didn't seem to be any indication that she was the girl he liked. At least, not presently. So then who was it? If it was someone close, then Minori? Or maybe Maya? Or possibly---

"Takasu-kun…"

Startled, his heart jumped.

Bending down like a cat, Ami had silently brought her face up close. He could smell milk on her breath, and unable to even look her in the face, he tried crawling backwards. However, his back almost immediately ran into the wall.

Ami didn't move any closer.

Instead of getting closer, she seemed to be slowly drawing him in with her moist amber eyes---

"…Takasu-kun, if I, showed you the real me…what would you do?"

"W, what, you say."

"…Would you, fall for me?"

The world fell silent.

Ryūji's leg inadvertently hit the dining table, and amidst the silence, the empty cup rolled onto the tatami mat.

The distance between their two faces, all that separated them was five centimeters.

Leaving it as a joke at the last moment, Ami's lips finally upturned into a smile.

"---No~t, I was joking. Did I make your heart race?"

…Or at least, it should have been.

"Oh my…"

To consider it all a joke, it seemed like only the two who were directly involved would accept that. At the sound of several filled plastic bags being dropped onto tatami mat, Ryūji nearly jumped.

Turning around reflexively, Ami ended up on top of the lower half of Ryūji's body.

Reflexively facing the same way, Ryūji was holding her waist calmly.

"…Yacchan…Could this have been on purpose?...That is…When I went shopping and while Kitamura-kun and Taiga-chan had fallen into ditches…So then…Umm…A~h, what should I do?!"

In a pose resembling Munch's The Scream, Yasuko had both her hands against her natural face and was bending her body restlessly back and forth.

Behind her in the entrance hall drenched with muddy water, Kitamura looked horrible as he pushed his twisted glasses up the bridge of his nose and was standing using a wooden sword as a crutch.

The similarly drenched Taiga---

"…No way…"

Taiga was being carried on Kitamura's back, and with only that, she fell silent and just had her eyes wide open.

In the corner of the room unheeded by anyone,
Inko-chan who had unexpectedly seen everything was lightly shedding feathers from all over his body.

Spin-off

The Legend of the Palmtop Tiger of Happiness

The third floor of the old school building.

Even though it was just after the end of the school day, the corridor was dim and there were no other students in sight. The busted fluorescent lighting would occasionally buzz and flicker, gloomily shining down upon Tomiie Kōta's already melancholic face as he walked.

He finally arrived in front of a door that had a piece of paper held up by scotch tape with some words someone had messily written in pencil.

It read, 'Student council room'.

"Haa." Kōta sighed and looked down at the decrepit doorknob with dull eyes. He wondered, just what was the point of coming to this place everyday---

"Gyahahaha!"

"…That's gotta be the president."

Knocked back by the overwhelmingly spirited laugh that emanated from beyond the door, he was hesitant to risk treading any further. Without really thinking about it, an image of the owner of that laugh popped into his head.

A dependable person who sometimes showed fatherly tough love...Like an older brother or a coach, terms like that fit that person's definitely 'manly' personality. Kōta had decided that he didn't hate that sort of person. However,

"Pardon me."

He opened the door and stepped inside in one simultaneous motion.

"Hey! You're late, first-year! Go ahead, sit over there, sit!"

"…Okay."

It had already been a few weeks since their first meeting, but he still couldn't get used to it.

"What's with that? Such a spiritless reply."

Tch, the manly person whose real name was Sumire Kanou immediately followed up the tongue click with a full and generous grin, saying “Go ahead and eat” while tossing him a pastry.

But moreover, that person was,

“Excuse me, president, I have the financial data for last year.”

“Ohh, I’ll look over it so give it here.”

Having long silky black hair gently resting on her delicate shoulders, a downcast look, and a pale complexion, she was wearing the appearance of a refreshing Japanese-styled beauty.

She was Sumire Kanou, the student council president.

She was also an honor student to the core, having never relinquished the top academic spot even once since being admitted to the school. By the way, her sister Sakura Kanou who was younger by two years was a freshman at the school; the two of them were called the Kanou sisters within the school grounds. That is, being the president and the elder of the two, Sumire was more like the older brother of the Sumire sisters.

"Hey Kōta. You were eating by yourself today, weren't you? I happened to pass by your class and I saw you were all alone."

"…Please mind your own business."

Sitting near the window with her feet planted far apart and holding the documents in one hand, Sumire was looking at him with a smirk. It seemed like she wasn't planning on leaving it alone,

"You still haven't made any friends? Even though May is almost over? Hasn't it been over two months since you joined this school?"

There was no consideration in the words coming from her light pink lips. Kōta remained silent, turning his back on her and looking down at the agenda.

"You're going to ignore me even though you're just a first-year?"

"Now, now, president."

Coming to his rescue was the second-year vice-president, Yūsaku Kitamura. With his

earnest-looking silver-rimmed glasses glinting in the light, he intervened by speaking calmly.

"Kōta started a month late, so I believe it's only been one month so far."

"Ohh, that's right!"

With a light bang, Sumire made a gesture similar to a clap.

"What, could you have been hit by a car the day before the school opening ceremony…?"

"…No. I got hit by a car the day before the exam for my first-choice school."

"Right, right, hmm, ah I've got it, your neighbor's house caught on fire and so your house got flooded as a result…"

"…That happened the day before a field trip in middle school. The day before the school opening ceremony, what I thought was an intense stomachache was actually my appendix, which burst while we were out eating to celebrate, and I knocked over one of the neighboring tables and collapsed…"

"Ah! So then you were hospitalized for a month!"

---Kōta could only hang his head in silence as she pointed at him. He already knew what Sumire was going to say next.

"Seriously, you're like a disaster magnet!"

Kyahahaha!...What was so funny?

"President, you're laughing too much. You're making Kōta feel bad."

An unbridled laughter continued to resound until Kitamura intervened, and a couple of general secretaries---Two second-years were pretending to be deeply involved in their work while their shoulders shook slightly.

'Go ahead and laugh if you want to laugh', Kōta pouted and turned away. Sorry for being so prone to misfortune. It was definitely true though.

Whenever there was a significant event, Kōta would inevitably suffer some cruel twist of fate. From the moment he was born up until today, that had always

been the case for him. Incidentally, the battery in his dad's video camera died the moment Kōta had been born, which ended up distracting the doctor who had then dropped him right back onto the delivery table.

And so he continues to have problems to this very day. In any case, he had ended up joining the student council at his own discretion.

Getting a late start in the all-important event of entering high school, Kōta had become disconnected from everyone else without realizing it. As he didn't really have a cheery disposition to begin with, he had been thinking of joining a club to make friends, but he had missed the freshmen recruitment season and thus missed the chance to join any of the clubs.

It wasn't like he was hated or anything, but of course he was stuck with absolutely no friends to hang out with

during free time. One day as he was wondering why he was in such a pitiful situation, Kōta came across a poster.

[General assistants wanted! Freshmen welcome! Student council]

General assistant…Basically, he took it to mean just helping out with various tasks. It wasn't like he really had any interest in helping out the student council with their business. However, the words 'freshmen welcome' really stood out to him at the time. As if the door to the last car of the train he had missed was still open---That was how he felt.

He had hoped he could become friends with other first-year helpers. Or else, if he became a member of the student council, then at least he could avoid being a nobody like he currently was. That's what he had thought.

He could still clearly remember the time when after summoning his courage as he faced the student council room, he had opened the door for the first time.

He remembered the beautiful black-haired Yamato Nadeshiko who had turned around in surprise. That he could work together on the student council with such a

beauty was beyond his imagination; he was unusually lucky---he had been thinking those kind of things. But then she had greeted him in a manly manner, yelling out "Yo!" and raising one of her hands. She had flopped down haphazardly onto a chair with her legs apart, and saying "A freshman, right?! What's up?! Well, go ahead and sit!", she had patted an empty chair…Kōta's knees had gone weak. Waiting in front of him had been a dependable 'older brother' wearing the guise of a Yamato Nadeshiko.

Furthermore, there weren't any other freshmen helpers and even his homeroom teacher was unaware that such a position in the student council even existed, saying "Eh? You're an assistant?".

However, he couldn't just quit because things hadn't turn out as he had hoped, and so Kōta was stuck going to the student council room each and every day.

He was seriously out of luck.

"---Ahh. I want to touch the Palmtop Tiger…"

Breathing a sigh, he was only talking to himself out loud. However,

"…Hm?"

Kitamura responded right away.

"Just now, did you say 'Palmtop Tiger'?

"…Kitamura-senpai, do you know about the Palmtop Tiger?"

"You shouldn't answer a question with a question."

Like he was using a disciplinary love whip, he hit Kōta over the head with the edge of Sumire's notebook.

"Ee!...What are you doing? I couldn't help it, because I really want to know."

With the edge of the notebook resting on top of Kōta's head, he started to rapidly move it back and forth like a saw.

"Ahh, h-hot!"

"Don't take the notebook lightly; it's essentially wood. Why do you want to know?"

"S, so violent…It's just something people in my class were discussing."

---He'd heard that if you touched the Palmtop Tiger, then you'd have good luck for your entire high school life.

Kōta had found out about it as part of the seven wonders of the school today at the same time that Sumire had seen him by himself during the afternoon break. He had overheard it from the guys who were chatting behind him.

"Hmm. So, with your horrible luck, you were thinking you definitely wanted to do it, but since you weren't friends with them, you couldn't ask about the details, is basically what happened."

"So timid." When he heard Sumire resume speaking, Kōta turned his back on her once again and muttered gloomily.

"That's enough already. Please drop it…I was just kind of wondering. It's not like it's real. Something made-up like that."

"No, you're wrong."

Kitamura's voice echoed throughout the room with an eerie intensity.

"The Palmtop Tiger does exist. I've seen it myself."

"Eh?! Is that really true?"

Surprisingly, Sumire also raised her hand,

"I've seen it too."

Even more members followed after the president saying it does exist and raising their hands while exchanging looks.

"So all of you upperclassmen are saying you've seen it ?"

"Yeah, it's pretty well-known amongst us second-years…But a legend of the Palmtop Tiger bestowing happiness…So it's gotten exaggerated that much…"

As if he couldn't take it anymore, Kitamura let out a bit of laughter. Sumire and the others were even grinning oddly.

"…W, what's with this atmosphere…?"

Unable to understand what was going on and trying to find out, Kōta looked around helplessly, but,

"That's it!"

Sumire suddenly shouted.

"Kōta, touch the Palmtop Tiger."

"…Huh?"

"If we have someone like you who's so prone to misfortune, then it'll spread to the rest of the student council, won't it? So this is my order as the president: you must touch the Palmtop Tiger and cure yourself of your misfortune without fail."

"…Even if you tell me to cure myself, I don't even know what the Palmtop Tiger is."

"You should be able to ask your classmates. Start gathering information as soon as possible tomorrow."

"…But it seems impossible."

Going "Wha~t?", both of Sumire's eyes went sharp until Kitamura cut in again with a "Now, now".

"I guess it would be difficult to just throw you into this , after all. Kōta, I'll give you one hint to start you off. In my class, in class 2-C there's someone named Kushieda; you should try talking to her. As far as I know, there isn't anyone in this school who knows more about the Palmtop Tiger."

"Kushieda…senpai, is it?"

Nodding affirmatively, Kitamura looked down at Kōta with a kind smile, but,

"…Kitamura-senpai."

"Hm?"

"You look like you're having fun."

"Yeah, a little."

His intelligent eyes behind those glasses, somehow they always seemed to be bottomless. Even now with the smile, he seemed to be looking through Kōta, his calm look piercing straight in front of him.

Kōta thought of Kitamura as a kind upperclassman, but after all, he was Sumire's right-hand man---Or rather, for some reason he felt like there was something up with everyone gathered in the student council room.

The super unlucky Kōta put his own strangeness aside and just stared at the faces of his upperclassmen with a suspicious look.

* * *

Got it, Kōta? First, the Palmtop Tiger is real. Also, it's horribly ferocious, so touching it is going to be a real task .

---Calling it her special service, Sumire had told him that much as a hint. However, with only that, he still didn't know just what the Palmtop Tiger actually was. In a situation like this, the normal expectation would be something like a bronze statue.

"…They're just messing with me now."

It was the next day, and Kōta was obediently standing before the door to class 2-C.

In any case, he had been strictly ordered by Sumire---She had told him that if he ignored her presidential command, it would become troublesome for him.

"Umm, in other words…You'll have me fired?"

If it was just that, it's not like he would really mind. However,

"No. I'll force you to be the next student council president."

"…Shouldn't the next president be one of the current juniors?"

"Congratulations! You'll be the first freshman president."

"No way."

So, looking sadly downwards, he had made his way to the second-year classroom by himself. He had been idly peeking inside for a while, but unable to find the reliable Kitamura, he was a bit stuck. There seemed to be nothing else to do but call out to someone on his own and ask them to get Kushieda for him.

"Umm, excuse me."

"Yes?"

He courageously called out to a passing female upperclassman. Turning around to face him,

"What is it?"

She had a bright smile, looking at Kōta with kind looking brown eyes. With her round face that was completely dazzling with a shining smile, her pink lips that were smooth and glistening, and a straight-forward honest and healthy appearance, she was completely different from the president's representation of an elder brother.

"Ah, umm…I, I'm looking for Kushieda-senpai who should be in this"

"Here~!"

"class…So yeah."

He was looking at the person in front of him who had her hand raised straight up in the air. Kōta tilted his head for a bit. Umm, thinking over what just happened, the person who suddenly called out "Here~!" was,

"I'm Kushieda~."

"Yeah."

Indeed, she was a cute but slightly strange girl…He felt somewhat disappointed all over again. It seemed like everyone he met in this place was strange, but Kōta

wondered if it might be the result of his own continuous bad luck.

"Come now, it's not 'Yeah'! You called me over here!"

She pushed him by the shoulder over-familiarly, making him stagger. Still, he regained a firm stance and looked straight forward,

"…Kitamura-senpai referred me to you."

He didn't want to be picked on by Sumire, so for now he had to deal with Kushieda. However,

"Kitamura-kun? Mmm, I didn't hear anything about this, you know?"

"Eh…"

Recalling that guy's glasses-clad face, Kōta stood speechless. That is, he was thinking about how he'd have to explain from the beginning about how he was searching for the Palmtop Tiger. The whole thing was kind of embarrassing. A freshman coming all this way to a juniors' classroom to ask "Where can I find the Palmtop tiger?"---that's really, it's kind of…

"Hey, Kushieda! This guy is a freshman, Kōta Tomiie. He's trying to find out about the Palmtop Tiger, so I told him about you. That is, that you're the most knowledgeable on the subject. Well, see ya!"

Like a passing breeze, Kitamura had popped by and easily explained everything Kōta had been too embarrassed to say before leaving just as quickly,

"Eh?"

Just as quickly, Kushieda's eyes suddenly became distantly cloudy.

"So you're trying to find out about the Palmtop Tiger …?"

"…Senpai, what's with that expression?"

"Quiet."

As if cutting off Kōta's escape route, Kushieda stretched her arms out while remaining against the door. Her previously bright smile was now completely gone, replaced by a concave expression,

"After you investigate the Palmtop Tiger, then what do you plan on doing…?"

Speaking in a purposefully low and raspy voice, she stared at him searchingly.

"Ah, that's…try to touch…"

"To touch. Touching. Wanting to touch. You want to touch."

"…You said it four times, didn't you? Well, yeah."

Fuh~. Kushieda's long sigh brushed against Kōta's bangs.

"…Have you got any insurance? Of course, I'm talking about accident insurance."

"I do."

At any rate, because of his fated misfortune, no matter what might happen, he was fully insured for just about any mishap possible.

Hearing that answer, Kushieda nodded firmly with an "Ok".

"I guess it's fine, you're young after all…It seems like you still don't know what the Palmtop Tiger actually is…"

"Yeah. That's why I'm here asking you."

"No matter what you hear from this old lady's lips, you still won't be able to understand…There's just one thing this old lady can teach you…The Palmtop part of Palmtop Tiger is referring to the size…"

…Old lady?

In front of the confused Kōta,

"U~! Cough! Cough, cough!"

"Ku, Kushieda-senpai, are you okay?...Ehh?!"

Gogh, while calling out the name of the famous painter, Kushieda the self-proclaimed old lady crumpled to one knee with her hair disheveled.

"Umm, you're just acting, aren't you? You're just poking fun at me, aren't you?"

"It's all over…for this old lady…Next you…should ask someone…named Takasu…"

Then just like that, she feigned her death in the hallway during the break, falling to the ground with a thud. Her skirt became flipped up to expose her white underwear from behind, but she showed no signs of being anxious or moving to do anything about it, which in a normal situation might elicit a nosebleed and be considered lucky, however…He was in distress wondering about what he should do…

"…Umm…Just who is this Takasu?"

Eventually, one of the girls from Kushieda's class passed by and then bent down over her, saying "Hey, I can see your panties." before fixing her skirt for her. Even then, Kushieda remained on the ground, but she pointed inside the classroom with her index finger towards one of the corners for him. Following her finger, he saw a few second year boys chatting happily.

Then Kōta gulped and stopped breathing. One guy from that group had noticed and turned around,

"…What's Kushieda doing…?"

Kōta thought he was going to be killed.

The way that guy muttered deeply gave off that kind of an atmosphere. Also, he had a sharp gaze that wasn't playing around. His face looked twisted in irritation and his appearance seemed too cruel to be human. He was tapping his foot and his whole body was emitting a thick and dangerous aura that took over his surroundings. Kōta wondered why such a terrible delinquent was in a high school like this that had relatively good standards.

Then, it hit him.

Without a doubt, that delinquent had to be Takasu.

Whatever he thought of as the most undesirable outcome, Kōta's fate would inevitably follow the path that led there. So he knew he was right. He'd had enough , so he was just about to go back to his classroom. Kōta believed that was the correct course of action, he was sure of it, but...

"Takasu-kun…This guy, it seems like he has some business with you…"

"Wha?!"

An instant before he could get away, the supposedly dead Kushieda had kindly called out to Takasu for him.

Of course, Kōta wasn't surprised at all when that delinquent guy responded to her call with a "What is it?" . His eyes glinting, he shifted his chair back and stood up from his seat. He wasn't particularly bulky, but the terrible strength coming from him as he stood up seemed to even distort the space around him.

Licking his dry lips, Takasu started closing the distance. Moving in large strides at full speed, he quickly made his way over.

"E, ee!"

Reflexively, Kōta had pivoted around. Turning around as if about to leap, he was prepared to dash away---

"Ah!"

"…~!"

He felt a light shock in his chest. He had accidentally run into someone. Reeling back, he spun to face the other way,

"Sorry!"

Confusedly lowering his head, he got ready to run. However,

"…O, ouch…"

It seemed like it was a more serious accident than he had thought. A small-looking girl was crouched to the side of the hallway; Kōta must have knocked her down when he had smacked into her. Surprised, he ran over to her,

"Gah!"

Squish, there was an unpleasant sensation beneath his feet---Probably what the girl had been carrying, a sandwich that had rolled into the hallway, which he had then stepped on. However, with Takasu getting closer and the girl still fallen in a crouch, there wasn't any time to worry about the bread. In any case, he extended his arm to help her up,

"Are you alrig…"

He lost his ability to speak.

Like a doll, her long hair was gently concealing her small body. Glancing upwards just a bit, she stared at Kōta.

Her face looked so purely white, it was almost transparent.

Her eyes twinkled mysteriously like the night sky.

Her lips were like a partially opened rose bud.

Seeing her amazingly elegant good looks peeking out through gaps of her interlocking hair, for a moment he practically forgot to breathe.

"…Wa…ah."

Feeling a shock like being struck by lightning, Kōta had forgotten about all the misfortune that had befallen him and was simply entranced by her stare. Like he was jumping naked into a shimmering night sky full of stars, he felt such a dangerous impulse---He completely lost touch with his surroundings. The second years who had

gathered there seemed to stop moving and his breath caught at the same time, and he couldn't think about anything else at all.

Simply fixated on the beauty in front of him…

“Run!”

“…~?!”

It was Takasu.

Before he knew it, Takasu the delinquent had gotten next to him and jumped in front of him. Blocking the way as if trying to hide the girl behind his back, Takasu looked extremely dreadful,

“Go, if you value your life, then go!”

“…Huh?”

He yelled. He was waving Kōta forward,

“Don’t just stand there, get going!”

“O, okay!”

It was definitely a threat. While Kōta didn't understand, he was unable to resist Takasu's voice and had to just leave the girl where she was and run off.

In other words, that girl has to be a prisoner.

Looking over the series of events, Kōta arrived at that conclusion. That delinquent Takasu was strong-arming her through fear to be his caged bird. He didn't know all the specifics, but he was sure that's how it was.

"…I really want to save her..."

Fuuh~…Heaving a sigh while imagining, Kōta was in the student council room after school.

Surprisingly quickly, two people turned to look at Kōta's face from the side without really looking at him.

"That's just what I'd expect of Kōta."

Sumire muttered with a hint of admiration. Folding his arms next to her,

"He rushes towards disaster like he's being steadily pulled by it…It's beyond all of our expectations, how he just runs blindly into danger."

Kitamura was also saying that kind of thing. Even the other members were similarly going "Yeah, yeah" in agreement, creating a strange feeling of unanimity in the relatively crowded room.

"…Go ahead, say whatever you'd like."

Feeling suddenly outcast, Kōta kept the back of his head facing his upperclassmen.

To set things straight, the current Kōta wasn't afraid of misfortune or whatever. Rather, if accepting some misfortune would let him rescue that beautiful second-year girl, he would accept time and again---The important part was that he had fallen for her at first sight .

He couldn't help but feel horribly regretful thinking about how he had run away and left her there. Even being glared at by that delinquent…No, he didn't care

what sort of antagonism he'd have to face. If he could just make it through a bit of pain, then he believed there would be a true happy end waiting for him.

"President. I'm going to do it."

Firmly raising his head, Kōta looked determinedly into Sumire's apricot-like eyes. She was silent for a while, but then she started shaking her head side to side.

"Don't do it. Give up. Don't do anything so frivolous. Just now, I shivered…Knowing your bad luck, just lay as low as possible.

"No way! I'll do it. I'll definitely get it done. I'll rescue that poor girl. Then I'll touch the Palmtop Tiger and be happy!...I'll touch it together with that girl…so we can both become happy together…Besides, the one who told me to do it in the first place was you, the president, wasn 't it?"

"…But, it doesn't seem like that poor girl or anyone else actually asked to be rescued."

Kōta was in a dream-like state of mind, however, and wasn't listening to what the others were saying. He was thinking of that girl's fair face. And her eyes that were

like a star-filled sky. And her fragile expression that was like glass. That girl's gentle fairy-like features…he was sure that there wasn't anyone else in this world like her.

"Umm. Kōta, you know, there's a something I think you should hear.."

"Please just leave me alone."

Kitamura tried futilely to stop Kōta's pleasant delusions, but he was already too far gone to turn back. Kōta was fully settled into his own private dream world. That girl, himself, and the Palmtop Tiger, the vision of a trinity of happiness floated vividly in his mind.

"Ah, fine. It's fine, Kitamura, so let's drop it. If it's like this, just let him do as he likes until it's over."

Even Sumire's firm voice didn't reach Kōta.

"Kōta already said that he wants us to leave him alone. He's not going to listen to any advice from us. Well, good luck to him or whatever."

"…Will this really be okay? Well,…Whatever."

* * *

T, there!

Holding himself back from crying out, Kōta passed in front of the classroom while trying to look inconspicuous . For a while he had been repeatedly passing by the entrance to class 2-C, just walking back and forth in the hallway and casually peeking in through the window, and he had finally found her. It was lucky that he wasn't spotted by anyone like Kushieda or Takasu.

Against the wall near a corner, he hid himself and thought over what he had seen. Even though it was break time, she had been sitting silently in her seat alone, not talking to anyone else. Her slender shoulders had been trembling in isolation, but she was like a fragrant

rose. She didn't have any friends, the same as himself… He thought that for a moment, but then he shook his head right away.

She was definitely being threatened by the jealous Takasu, being forbidden to make friends with anyone else. He was sure of it. That Takasu, what a despicable guy. Just how small-hearted could he be.

"…Please don't give up. Because I'll find the Palmtop Tiger and bring it to you soon."

After quietly mumbling, he started walking quickly down the hallway again while acting casual. With his hands in his pockets he firmly grasped his present to her. Still warm, it was a can of coffee he had just bought recently.

Of course it would be great if he could hand it to her himself, but they weren't nearly that close yet. So as it was now, remaining anonymous,

"…Here!"

He sent it with impeccable control---Targeting via the window, he tossed the warm can of coffee towards the girl of his affections. In his head a scene played out: "

Here, drink this!" "Eh?" Toss…Spin, spin, spin…Catch. Then she would say "It…It's warm…" as she grasped it with both hands…Or something like that. Just like in his vision, the can was following the trajectory beautifully as it headed straight for the girl's head; after he was certain of that much, he dashed away leaving the scene.

The sound of a thud could be heard behind him, but it didn't register with Kōta as he was running in a daze. In any case, Kōta could hardly believe it himself that he had done something so extreme. That he who's normally shy could even do this sort of dramatic thing. Ahh, now that he felt this love, he was steadily feeling more like a man …Grasping his blushing face with both hands and running away, he actually looked kind of girly.

That present of a warm can of coffee, in Kōta's mind there was a deeper meaning attached to it. That someday, something even warmer…he would give her something even better. Yes, that is, he would give her everyday happiness. In other words, he would deliver her from Takasu's captivity.

At this rate, even the day when he would touch the Palmtop Tiger together with the rescued girl wasn't all too distant. The palmtop-sized tiger statue or painting or

whatever it was, hand in hand and side by side, the two of them would touch it, gently and smoothly. “Let’s become happy

Sp

,” he’d say. “Yes

Sp

," she'd say.

"…Oh yes. My luck is finally turning around…"

Kōta shivered in delight---

"~"

His shivering was soon disturbed by a different sort of trembling in the sudden stillness of the afternoon. The ever dull time in the student council room had passed by, and he was standing in front of his shoe racks, which he had looked into when he was preparing to go home.

Placed inside of Kōta's shoe box had been a carefully folded piece of paper, which had made him wonder. Just as he was speculating what it could mean, his heart had suddenly gone cold.

There in scribbled letters,

Be careful walking at night 2-C Takasu

Just those words,

“Hey.”

“Wah!”

Jumping at the voice that called out, Kōta tensed up and made a racket bumping backwards against the shoe rack.

“W, what is it?! You, don’t you have club activities?!”

“Today is a day off.”

Even though he had been called ‘you’, Kitamura’s gentle smile didn’t waver as he peered at the piece of paper that Kōta was holding in his hands behind his back .

“Is that a warning message from Takasu? He must be pretty troubled as well.”

He muttered something ridiculous like that.

"That's not how it is! T, this is, actually…In other words, you know what, right?"

"Basically, it says to be careful walking at night, doesn't it? Takasu's so kind, he's giving out a cautious warning to an underclassman he doesn't even know."

At such excessive optimism, Kōta didn't have the will to reply. Saying to be careful walking at night, isn't that just like what something a yakuza would say? Like basically, you won't be forgiven for doing something weird, or you better prepare yourself.

"Ooh…~"

A chill went down his spine. He was resolved to oppose even Takasu if it was for that girl's sake, but right now, remembering that glinting dangerous stare, he couldn't stop his whole body from shivering. He wouldn't be surprised if that guy whose eyes looked crazy went so far as to ambush an innocent underclassman along the streets at night; it would probably be easier than breathing for that guy. Kōta could just picture Takasu coming for his life wielding an unrefined wooden sword or something.

"Well then, see you tomorrow."

Leaving the terrified Kōta alone, the heartless Kitamura quickly walked out of the school building. Reflexively, Kōta was about to call out at his back to get him to stop.

"…No!"

Kōta firmly balled up his outstretched hand.

A fleeting image of that girl's face crossed his mind. Hadn't he decided to rescue her even if it meant some misfortune? If that was so, then he shouldn't be scared just because of Takasu's threat. He shouldn't be relying on Kitamura for help either. Forcing himself to act strong and in control, Kōta crumpled the sheet of paper in an instant. Then without really checking to make sure, he tossed it in the direction where a trashcan was supposed to be.

"Wahaha, that's right! I threw it away!"

"Sounds like you're having fun."

When he turned around to face the bitter voice, he saw Sumire standing a bit apart from him.

"…President, what are you doing?"

"Good question."

With a piece of wastepaper precariously balanced on top of her head like a miracle, Sumire was scowling and making a generally sullen face.

"If it had been a pebble or something, then I'd be gushing blood from my head like a fountain and I'd have died in an unsightly manner."

"Hah…If it was a plate, you'd be a kappa then."

He was vaguely nodding when the situation finally became clear to him. The thing on her head was what he himself had just thrown away.

"…It seems like the president has relatively bad luck as well. Normally it wouldn't land so perfectly, would it?"

Muttering "Okay, my bad", he walked up to her and plucked the scrap off her head, and he was just about to place it into the trashcan. However, he was suddenly hit by a strange fit of laughter.

"Fufu, the president just now…Ahaha, it was like this. "

He wasn't letting Takasu's threat bother him---A sudden elation took over Kōta's unusual tension. Putting the scrap he was holding onto his head, he turned around to face Sumire. Imitating that ridiculous looking appearance, he couldn't stop laughing. Sumire just stared at him a while without any change of expression. He was starting to think 'Ah, maybe this is just a bit too stupid', but,

"Even though you're eighteen, hahahaha, you were wearing trash on your head."

Shaken during his fit of laughter, the trash didn't stay and grazed his nose as it fell towards the ground.

"Hahahaha, hahaha, haha…ha~a."

Finally sighing, nearly a minute had passed by the time his fit subsided. Bending down and picking up the paper, he finally threw it away for real. Then going " yare-yare", he wiped his forehead that had gotten sweaty from laughing too much,

"Well then, good-bye."

Like that he turned away from Sumire setting off to go home. However,

"What is it?"

Sumire was grasping his shoulder firmly.

"Kōta."

A smile. The living, smiling Japanese doll placed a key into Kōta's hand.

"This is the key for the student council room. I was going to the vice-principal's room to return it, but I just remembered something important. You know about the locker, right? Inside there's close to a hundred volumes of activity logs that are kept by each generation of the student council. Each volume needs to be labeled by year . They need to be labeled on the front cover and on the binding and arranged accordingly so they're easy to look through. Before today is over…I leave it to you, assistant-kun."

"…Huh? Right now? Me, by myself?"

"That's right. I'll check it tomorrow morning and if it's not all finished…You understand, right? Well then, good luck."

"But it's not possible."

"Good luck."

Within both of her pretty and calm-looking eyes, the single character for 'wrath' glowed as Sumire waved goodbye with her fair white hand.

* * *

Over three hours had passed by the time he finally finished with his appointed overtime work.

When he looked around he noticed that the sun had completely set and it must have been evening for some time. He passed the school gate and moved along the main road, and by the time he made it to his residential area, night had completely fallen. Kōta walked briskly along the asphalt road that was intermittently lit by street lamps. Be careful walking the streets at night---That brief message came back to him all of a sudden as he walked home along the dark street…

Even though he had gathered his courage and vowed to face things head on, now that he was actually walking along a dark road, he was feeling extremely wary of his surroundings. Had it always been this quiet? Both in front and behind, there wasn't a single sign of life.

Unconsciously, he felt practically frozen where he stood,

"…No. It's not like I've really done anything yet."

He whispered quietly to himself like that and firmly raised his head to get over his anxiety. That's right, there wasn't anything to be worried about. And there wasn't

anything to be so afraid about either. Sure, he had been threatened, but that didn't mean anything was actually going to come of it---he was thinking when,

"Uwa~."

The thicket rustled. So surprised he thought he was going to die, Kōta jumped to the side. He was just about to run away, but,

"Me~ow."

A small voice cried out.

"Wha…Is it a cat?"

Almost blending into the shadows, a jet black cat peeked its head out from the thicket. Stepping a bit forward, only its paws were white; looking as if it was wearing socks, it was really cute.

Looking up at Kōta as he sighed, the kitten cutely cried out once more. Then it raised its tail high and snuggled up against his pant leg.

The whole thing was quite cute, and Kōta unconsciously forgot to be afraid as he looked down.

When he extended his finger and called out “Tut-tut”, the cat pressed its head against his ankle.

“C, cut it out, you’re going to get fur on me…Ah, I’ve got it.”

He remembered that he had the tail from a fried mackerel left over in his bentou box. Squatting down on the spot, Kōta took out his bentou box from inside his bag. While shying away from the cat that kept mewing and pushing on him, he untied the bundle, removed the lid, and picked up the mackerel tail with his fingertips.

It would suck for fur to get all over his uniform, so he couldn’t just stick around here playing with this cat forever. So as a parting gift, he was thinking of throwing the tail into the thicket where the kitten had emerged. The kitten would probably follow it and then return home, and once that was done, he could return home too.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m giving it to you right now. There!”

With a toss, Kōta had planned to throw it forward and off to the side. However, the kitten’s golden-colored eyes were fixated behind Kōta. The mackerel tail left his hand and flew cleanly behind him.

Ignoring Kōta as he mutter “Crap”, the kitten charged towards him. However,

“Meow…~”

Near Kōta’s knees, it suddenly puffed up its fur all over its body. Expanding to roughly three times its size, arching its back, and pulling back its ears, it trembled and took a step backwards, and then like a bouncing ball, it ended up jumping into the thicket.

“Huh? You don’t want it?”

Standing up as he wondered what was wrong, he turned around about to look for the tossed mackerel tail---

“…”

He was speechless.

A girl was standing right in front of him.

With the tail of the eaten mackerel unbelievably stuck to her forehead, the girl he liked was standing right there .

"---Tomiie, Kōta."

Like an extremely faint growl, it was a terribly level voice that crept along the ground. Meeting so suddenly, the immediately obvious need to apologize disappeared into the darkness of the night. He couldn't even ask her why she knew his name or anything.

The girl's eyes. Her stare.

"You know, I…I had been planning to forgive you."

The edge of his face went numb as he started panicking, and Kōta was thinking, "How weird.".

With her long hair, her beautiful face, and her short stature, it was unmistakably her. The captive girl he continued to long for. But, he wondered why she was here.

"Even though you knocked me down and stepped on my sandwich, because it didn't seem like you did any of that on purpose…And because you're Kitamura-kun's underclassman…In a personally rare showing of tolerance, I was going to kindly forgive you for all that."

The girl who was like a sweet spring wind, when he looked at her after they crossed paths on the night street, she seemed to be shaking with unusual intensity, and so... .and so...

“A, a, a, ah…?”

Remaining by her, he---Why, he wondered why he wouldn't stop trembling.

Too scared to move, he wondered why he couldn't even get his voice to come out.

"And then, when you knocked me in the head with the coffee can, I was going to tolerate it and even forgive you for that too. Because Kitamura-kun had desperately apologized. 'Please forgive him for my sake', he said… Now that I think about it, it seems like Kitamura-kun was way too nice to you…And I think I was too."

It felt like her presence was steadily growing.

As Kōta's whole body started freezing up, he unconsciously took a single step backwards.

Her eyes looked like empty spaces filled with darkness .

Kōta couldn't even breathe as he desperately tried to comprehend the situation.

"U, umm…Eh? W, wha?"

"Even Ryūji Takasu made an effort to stop me. "He's a freshman so don't do anything mean to him," he had said…And now here I am, completely coincidentally. I had to finish up something for art, so I was late going home…And it just so happens that you were walking in front of me."

"H, how strange…"

Kōta's feeble voice became fully immersed in a monologue.

"Just now, when I turned around, I thought there was nobody around…Ah, could it be…Yeah, it must be because you're too short, so I didn't see you, I think…?"

He was talking to himself---However, it seemed the short girl in question could hear him as well. He saw her fair face begin to twitch. It was definitely not a good sign,

"…Is that right? Yeah, I see…That's right."

The girl deliberately picked the well-stuck mackerel tail off of her forehead. Giving it a glance for just a moment, she wryly laughed with a "Fu" as her lips curled,

"---Not funny!"

Smack! She threw it at Kōta's legs with terrifying force. Kōta leaped backwards without saying a word. From within the thicket, the kitten with the sock-like paws watched as the mackerel tail embedded itself into the asphalt like a bullet. It tried to discreetly extend one of its trembling front paws,

"Tomiie…Kōta…"

Hearing her thin voice that sounded like a poisonous harp that might be played in hell, it timidly shivered and silently retreated.

"Even I have a limit to my tolerance."

She silently raised her face. That stare, it went right through Kōta.

"…Ee…"

He tripped over his own legs.

He fell backwards.

Her eyes as she looked down at him---Tinged with madness, they looked ready for murder.

The mad glint in her eyes was that of a beast spurred on by the scent of blood in the air; it was basically saying, "There's prey"---She would bite her prey to death and consume it; she would rend its flesh and feed her hunger ---Her ferocious growling voice,

"…I won't forgive you…"

It was engulfed by melancholy as she smiled viciously.

With her blood-red lips perfectly resembling that of a ferocious tiger,

"…Huh…?....Tiger…? Ah?"

Dreadful and brutal…And small…Kind of, palmtop-sized…?

"…Palmtop…Tiger…?"

His mind went blank in an instant.

A boy's wail resounded throughout the residential district, until finally---it disappeared.

* * *

7:15 in the morning.

Without any other students around yet, Kōta arrived unseen by anyone at the entrance where the second-years ' shoe racks were lined up.

The topmost and leftmost shoe box for the girls' of class 2-C.

Just as he was ordered, he tried to thrust the paper bag he held with both hands into that spot. But it didn't go in , so he tried to rearrange the contents so it would fit.

A special sandwich box set and the most popular tomato, bacon, and cheese sandwich from the Maruya shop that was near the north entrance of the station. The second most popular teriyaki chicken sandwich. Along with that, special syrupy puddings that were only sold at the local convenience store, in custard and café au lait flavors. A three-pack of yogurt that contained vanilla beans. And then one liter of milk.

There shouldn't be anything wrong with the goods as he had checked everything over as if he might die.

He tried to put it in again after having made the bag just a bit more compact, and this time at least, his offering fit in just perfectly. Finally, he verified the spot once more, and he verified the nameplate once more,

"…Ha…hahaha…"

He fell to his knees exhausted. That girl was most definitely the living legend, the Palmtop Tiger. Anyhow, her name was Taiga Aisaka. Taiga…The palmtop-sized Taiga-san.

"Who the heck came up with such a ridiculous nickname…?"

He didn't even have the strength to laugh, and he just crouched underneath the Palmtop Tiger's shoe box. The things that were firmly stuffed into it were the requested items of simple luxury.

"Huh? Kōta, what are you doing here this early in the day…?"

Turning around at the voice coming from behind him,

"…Buh!"

Kōta stared up at Kitamura as he burst into laughter.

"Y, you…Your face! Did Aisaka do that to you?!"

"…You should be able to figure it out just by looking …What about you, senpai?...Is it club activities?"

"That's right, club, club ac…Buh."

Buahahaha, he was being laughed at with a spitting guffaw, but it's not like he had the strength to retort. He'd have to just live with this face for a while.

Last night, handling Kōta roughly and taking complete control of him in the end, the Palmtop Tiger had said---"

A natural idiot like you should borrow the powers of Feng Shui to live!"

So on Kōta's face, his nose was the center of the cardinal directions…Carefully with an oil-based magic marker, she had started with his chin as north and drawn a freehanded octagon like a Feng Shui compass all over his face. Whether he rubbed at it or washed his face, the compass for finding happiness just wouldn't come off at all.

"…Se~~riously, it was a horrible experience. She's definitely a tiger. She's a beast that can't be handled. Because she's a dangerous creature, and like that…She's become so famous that she's a legend, right…All of you upperclassmen knew all about it, and yet you encouraged me to keep going, didn't you?"

"We didn't plan on doing that. I tried to tell you, but didn't you say to leave you alone? And the president said to leave it alone too."

"…You, would you follow the president's commands no matter what she says?"

Hm, that's probably about right, Kitamura was nodding while looking calm,

"…Fuhaha!"

He suddenly broke out in laughter all over again.

"Anyway you, that face! Your face looks kind of like an anus!"

"G, go ahead and laugh if you want to laugh…I seriously believed in what you guys were saying and you make fun of me…Anyway, I get what the Palmtop Tiger really is now, but…what about the others? Like Kushieda-senpai."

"Kushieda is, well, no matter how I look at it, I'd say she's Aisaka's closest friend."

"F, friends?!...Those two?! Are friends?!...That's quite a shocking development. Well then, what's that scary looking Takasu-senpai to the Palmtop Tiger? Is he a friend too? Or, could it be…he's her boyfriend, or something?"

When he asked that, Kitamura's laughter immediately receded,

"You want to know? It's unfortunate, but that's the one thing I really can't say anything about. The relationship between those two is possibly the only real school mystery."

"What's with that…Ah well, whatever!"

In the end, he was just being played around with by the student council members. He was just being made fun of by them. He understood that much at least.

Kōta angrily turned his back on Kitamura and ran off. In any case, he had an anus on his face, and he was cursed with misfortune after all---!

"Ah, Kōta! Wait up!"

Was he supposed to turn around? Just ignoring Kitamura's voice altogether, Kōta continued to run.

"So you touched the Palmtop Tiger! How was it, do you feel like you're blessed?!"

"---~!"

He quickly climbed up the staircase silently and shook off the question. He didn't even feel like telling him 'No'. Ahh, that's right, he had certainly touched the Palmtop Tiger. He had pushed back against the oil-based magic marker that was pressed against his face while he was being ridden like a horse, and he had even struggled with desperate seriousness. And, he had been completely overpowered. Against that short girl, he hadn't been able to put up any sort of resistance.

Just what kind of person was she---He couldn't think of her as anything but a definitely weird person. Shaking off his vexation, the unfortunate Kōta ran determinedly down the hallway. Then, he jumped into the classroom that should have been empty,

"Ah…~"

He hastily covered his face with both hands. However, it looked like it was too late.

The few classmates who were in class earlier than expected for some reason yelled out in surprise, looking at Kōta's face.

That's right after all, if some guy suddenly appeared with compass directions on his face, just about anyone would be surprised, probably. Kōta was relatively desperate, and just leaving his scribbled face bare, he walked over to his own desk. Ahh, now he was going to be even more separated from the rest of his class…is what he was thinking.

"Wahahaha! Tomiie, what's wrong with your face?!"

"Let us see, let us see, what the heck did you do?!"

Bright voices full of laughter suddenly began to engulf Kōta's surroundings. His classmates who rushed over were roughly rubbing at his face with their outstretched fingers but refrained from being too rough.

"N, that is, this,"

"Eh, what is it, what is it? What happened?"

"Tell us, come on! How the heck did you get like that?!"

Circling Kōta's desk, they were waiting for him to speak with shimmering eyes. They waited to hear about

what the heck happened, about why he was in such a ridiculous state.

"…This is, actually you see,"

Facing them as they leaned forward expectantly, Kōta started at the beginning of what happened, speaking quickly. The others seemed to think the whole thing was quite amazing. As soon as the story progressed, they'd interject, like "Geh!", "Seriously?!", "Cool!", further increasing the excitement.

And so Kōta had confronted the legendary Palmtop Tiger.

He had even been able to touch her.

The third floor of the old school building.

"See you tomorrow!" "Yeah, see ya!"…Noisily parting with his classmates, Kōta was walking quickly down the hallway.

He was even considering quitting the student council, but right now, his legs were taking him unwaveringly to the student council room. So he was thinking he would just keep going for a little while longer. There were things he wanted to say to those malicious upperclassmen, after all.

That he had touched the Palmtop Tiger.

That some good things had happened.

Saying 'good things', he'll probably be laughed at by Sumire for believing in it, but…after getting delayed a month for entering high school, finally being able to talk with other people was a blessing enough for Kōta that he would believe in the miracle of the Palmtop Tiger. He felt like he had laughed three times as much today as he had the entire month from when he entered high school up until yesterday.

So Kōta's eyes were brighter than usual as he pushed open the familiar door. As if a new everyday life had begun for him, that was how he felt---

"Sorry I'm late…Uwa!"

In an instant, a dazzling flashing light had bombarded his eyes, and he looked away in confusion. What in the world…

"A, a flash?!"

"Jackpot! Already got one for commemoration!"

As soon as he opened his eyes just a little, Sumire had the digital camera ready and set off the flash again. Behind her were the second-years, the secretary and general assistant combo who easily handled the workload like always. Also,

"Well done, president."

Next to Sumire, Kitamura was clapping.

"Wh…What are you doing?!"

"Your face is pretty interesting, so I was thinking we need to keep some commemoration photos…No, even so , really…Bufu! That face!"

Dahahahaha! Nuahahahaha!

Her extreme outburst of laughter that was twice as manly as usual resounded throughout the student council room. So just like that after all, Kōta was intimidated now that she was right in front of him,

"Ah, I laughed and laughed! All right, since we've got the commemoration photos already, go ahead and quickly take it off with this!"

Wiping away her tears, Sumire tossed Kōta a small tube.

"What is this?"

"This brand of remover is said to be among the best on the market. In any case, it dissolves even nail polish, and if that's no good, then I guess you've got a skin disease. Here, take this too."

She threw him a towel, and Kōta slung it over his shoulder. Usually in this case, he would go "Yes, yes, I got it.", however,

"…President."

He had turned around as he said that.

"What?"

"You're quite kind."

Suddenly, Sumire's eyes became round. Her lips seemed to forget what to do, with her mouth remaining just a bit agape---Kōta just left the room. Walking down the hallway, he struck a small victory pose.

"I got her…!"

For Sumire to make such a face…Yeah, it was the first time that he had stumped that 'older brother' figure and even made her speechless. He had made her unable to say anything back.

He was feeling pretty good. He might have markings on his face, but even so, today had turned out pretty well . Maybe his luck had really turned around after touching the Palmtop Tiger.

Perhaps because he thought about it like that, he didn' t feel any hatred at all for the Palmtop Tiger, even if she did cause him some suffering. Of course, she was scary, so he didn't feel like getting involved with her a second time, but,

"Well, a beauty is a beauty."

Seeing her close up, the Palmtop Tiger was a first-class extraordinarily beautiful girl. He felt like he could understand just a bit why his upperclassmen would call her by that kind of a nickname. Scary, someone you don't want to get involved with or make angry, but, you can't just ignore her because you're scared.

If he couldn't ignore her, he would watch that pretty girl along with everyone else from a distance---Without intruding, from a safe distance. If he treaded past the border approaching her, he would be hunted down. Without knowing the danger or anything at all, Kōta had accidentally gotten one step too close. The result was that he became a guy with compass markings all over his face .

And so, what did Kōta decide to do now that he was fully aware of everything?

He decided to maintain a safe distance.

Whatever unfortunate events he might call upon himself because of his own unluckiness, he decided he would at least remain far enough away from the Palmtop Tiger that he wouldn't provoke her any more than he

already had as he continued to watch her discreetly. The comfort of the safety zone didn't seem all that bad. With such complicated feelings in his heart, he was going to finally start living his high school life from here on in.

Humming contently in the nearby bathroom, Kōta forcefully opened the window wide open. Actually, he did it with a little too much force,

"…Crap!"

He ended up dropping the tube that Sumire had given him outside. Confusedly leaning out the window and looking down to the ground, he became petrified. He was frozen. It just had to be like this, didn't it? Even though he had said he would withdraw to safety, his own bad luck completely ignored his wishes with ease.

"A, awa, awawa…~"

Down there, below the open window.

Seeming like a tiger, the one gripping her head and holding the tube in her small hand was---

Author's Notes

This is the relatively plump “Yu”. My favorite phrase is “Well then, why don’t we settle this with sumo?!”, my desire is the sumo arena, and my special move is the penetrating sumo slap. How about it, the stability of my lower body is…Well, you’re probably already amazed, right?...It’s first come, first served, you know? (Message to the heads of the sumo stables)

Well, to everyone who’s picked up Toradora 2, I’d like to say thank you very much! This second volume had some extreme parts scattered about for some reason, but you did enjoy it, didn’t you? I’ll be continuing on with another volume, so I really hope to have everyone’s full support! In order to provide you with an enjoyable experience, it’s fine even if I have to trade in the ‘(youth of my skin)’ that I prize as a woman to the devil of love comedies…! I’ll give you this too, take it! (Referring to feminine hormones)

Now then, most people probably already know about it, but “Our Tamura-kun” is being serialized in Dengeki Comic Gao!. I’m looking forward to seeing just how Tamura and the others will look in manga form. I’m hoping you’ll all accept it along with “Toradora!”.

So. Anyway, I'm crazy about cod roe spaghetti. Every day that extraordinary deliciousness makes me tremble …Ooh, it's so pervertedly delicious. The thing that fattens me up like crazy even more in the winter is the gem of the meat bun world, the totally delicious Chinese BBQ bun. And also…Well, that is…BBQ buns, or rather …Chinese BBQ ramen…(Plural form). Eating several bowls a day, it's no wonder I'm putting on weight.

However, it's not like I'm just putting on weight willy-nilly. I tried dieting. A low-carbohydrate diet. I had a set menu planned for a week, but after one full day, all I could think about was rice. All that was left on my mind was rice. Filled one hundred percent with that white, sticky, and oh so delicious stuff. I received a called from my editor about work, but my head was dysfunctional and I couldn't even reply at all. Hungry and crying, I started phoning my mother…I wanted to hear her voice…Well then, I, I stopped. My editors even told me "It's starting to mess up your work, so cut it out already.", so I stopped limiting what I ate. I don't want to cry those bitter tears! So I reaffirmed my love of rice…Ah ?!...Love, rice…Rabu, kome…?...Having thought of such a thing, maybe I should explain it like that…? To my brain?

Well then, all of you readers who have hung with me up until now! Once again, from the bottom of my heart, I want to say thank you very much. I love you all so very much, I'd want to introduce my parents to you all. If my work can be enjoyed even a little, it makes me extremely happy. Also, to Yasu-sensei and my editor, thank you for always taking care of me. In the future as well, I hope we can continue to trudge along as a threesome. And then now, to Kinoko Nasu-sensei who put the comment on the band. Thank you very much for your time. If it's Nasu-sensei, then I don't mind if I'm seen with the proper style (Hair pulled up into a bun) that's passed down in the Takemiya family…

Yuyuko Takemiya